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# CHILD POVERTY: TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

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It's hard to visualize one billion children. However, standing side-by-side one meter apart, the developing world's poor children would wrap around the equator twenty-five times. Defined as children who are severely deprived of one or more basic human needs, the 56 percent child poverty rate in developing countries is even higher in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and in rural areas (Gordon et al. 2003). Despite the depth and width of the problem, too often the plight of children is neglected in political and academic debates about poverty (Minujin et al. 2005). This exclusion is unacceptable for several reasons. First, these figures represent untold and desperate hardship. Children are also the innocent victims of poverty and suffer unduly from and are powerless with respect to policies targeted toward their parents, guardians, communities or economies. The condition of children not only shapes their own futures but also the future of their countries. The varied detrimental impacts of the poverty they face in childhood accumulate as they age into adulthood, increasing the likelihood that they will become the poor parents of tomorrow (Young Lives 2006). Young people who grow up in poor households are more likely to work as children, drop out of primary school (if attend at all), engage in risky sexual behaviour, marry and bear children early, and have a more difficult time finding stable and remunerative employment as adults (Lloyd 2005).

The age-old tragedies of war, famine, and disease continue to wreck the lives of vast numbers of children. And poverty is not just about income. It is also, as one world religious leader said recently, about *resources not easy to quantify – the stability of a domestic or an educational environment, access to unpolluted natural space, familiarity with the practices and languages that offer access to human meaning*.<sup>1</sup>

In an effort to refocus attention on childhood poverty, and to facilitate dialogue across the CROP network, we briefly sketch broad research themes that require our attention. This list derives in part from a recent exchange between CROP-affiliated scholars with interests in this area, but it is not exhaustive. We view it as a point of departure for further discussion and development.

*Child development:* Undernourishment, environmental risks, and other correlates of poverty have negative implications for children's development. Advances in environmental science and neuroscience could be brought to bear on the social and physical environments of impoverished children in relation to their cognitive and social development. The cumulative impact of impaired cognitive ability on later life social and economic outcomes also requires greater attention among researchers.

*Child poverty and policy:* We recognize the fact that in some countries more children have risen above poverty and that India and China are experiencing an explosion of economic growth. At the same time we should remember that income inequality between and within many countries is increasing and that the capacity of the have-nots to make it to the global economy diminishes as the price of entry gets higher in terms of education, skill levels and levels of capital investment. The causes of poverty are internal and external to any particular country. Key internal causes include absence of natural resources, corruption, civil strife, and massive within-country income inequality. Externally, unfair trade agreements, and large cuts in domestic spending demanded by international lending organizations as part of the Washington Consensus, contribute to child poverty. Conditionality and other strategies to poverty alleviation need to be evaluated relative to their impact on child poverty.

*Children, education and participation in the household economy:* For many years, researchers have been concerned about children working to the detriment of their education and sometimes their health. While it is true that children contribute in important ways to the household economy, they suffer long-term effects of early entry into the work force. Some

forms of child labour can inculcate useful skills but many forms of child labour do not prepare children for the level of skills demanded in a globally competitive job market. Age and the type of work are critical factors in determining whether child labour yields a net advantage to the child. While enrolment at elementary school levels has been increasing in many countries, the quality of that education is sometimes so low as not to increase students' chances of a decent job. In addition, during the transition from elementary school to secondary school, many young people drop out of the formal education system.

*Violence:* In many countries, low-income children and youth are concentrated in intensely poor communities with high levels of drug-related violence, an absence of effective policing and high youth homicide rates. According to the latest U.N. study on violence (Pinheiro 2006), economic status, age, sex and gender are among the many factors associated with the risk of lethal violence. World Health Organization estimates suggest that the rate of homicide of children in 2002 was twice as high in low-income countries than high-income countries. The highest child homicide rates occur among adolescents aged 15 to 17 years (3.28 for girls, 9.06 for boys).

*Multiple jeopardies:* The intensified vulnerability of children caused by the confluence of poverty and other problems is worthy of greater attention by researchers. Notable here is the HIV/AIDS pandemic which intensifies child poverty by threatening the ability of parents to provide for them, and exposes children to the risk of becoming orphaned. Discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or caste can have an especially vicious impact on poor children.

*Methodological issues:* Deficiencies in orthodox, income-based, measures of poverty are well-recognized. While myriad alternative multidimensional indicators have been developed (e.g., that used by Gordon et al., 2003), an evaluation of diverse poverty indicators for purposes of understanding the contours of child poverty is needed. Concepts such as inequality, vulnerability, exclusion, capabilities, and so forth need to be considered, along with applicability and relevance of child poverty indicators across different regional contexts.

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## Notes:

- 1) Rt. Rev. Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, *Christianity, Islam and the Challenge of Poverty*, speech to the Bosniak Institute, Sarajevo, May, 2005, [<http://tinyurl.com/yzpnmv>]