

Decent childhoods: Reframing the fight to end child poverty ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Full report in pdf ^[2]

Excerpts from the report:

Introduction

Labour's pledge to end child poverty, now enshrined in the Child Poverty Act, was a bold and important goal. The extent of the ambition allied to the sustained commitment to real progress could have ensured the Labour Government's progressive legacy. Yet, despite some major achievements, the child poverty agenda did not deliver on its promise.

As advocates for this agenda we spent several years seeking to achieve change through Government and wider action. As the 2010 target of halving child poverty approached we became increasingly aware of the narrowness of the debate. The target was dragging the agenda to focus on a simple equation: x billion invested in tax credits would take y children out of poverty. The indicator of success - the poverty line - had become the target, and evolved into the de facto policy goal. But when politicians or campaigners (ourselves included) spoke of children being lifted out of poverty, what did we actually mean? What was the life change we were referring to and attempting to communicate to the wider public?

It is not that money does not matter, it is critical, but the approach felt politically and economically unsustainable, even before the credit crunch and 2010 general election. Something was lacking; yes the standard of living of people on low incomes could be improved, but with a ceiling to the transformative potential. There was a diminishing return on tax credits in terms of the kinds of qualitative changes to life experiences that people aspire to: better homes, better neighbourhoods, better prospects, better jobs, stronger and more secure family lives.

We believe that the approach which dominated Labour's time in Government was brave, sincere, had positive results but was ultimately lacking.

Despite the language of austerity which dominates our current public debate, we remain an extraordinarily rich country. That wealth is shared unevenly. Most of us enjoy a material standard of living incomparable to generations before; but too many - millions of children - are left behind. Perhaps we can find a shared language for our individual and collective aspiration that sets out what we should expect as a decent childhood for those who grow up in 21st Century Britain. This review is an attempt to start thinking about the way we frame our aspirations for decent childhoods for all, and in doing so to set out some of the social and policy levers we may need to pull to get there.

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Promoting a balance between paid work and family life; childcare is still central

Any employment strategy needs to address the balance between paid work and family life, and the distribution of paid work and caring between men and women. We know that countries with low child poverty rates are those that combine high maternal employment rates with low in-work poverty. Bearing in mind the importance of valuing children this strategy must be about more than just moving more women into the workplace. Jane Waldfogel's research on U.S. welfare reform shows that despite the large increase in female employment that followed the tightening of benefit eligibility rules, this increase was not accompanied by additional spending on children, and there were few positive impacts on child health and development outcomes, with some adverse impacts on 10 and 11 year olds.¹³⁰ Any strategy needs to address the distribution of working and caring within households - so that it is normal for both partners in a couple, or for a single parent to be able to combine paid work with caring.

Flexible working policies, participation tax rates and parental leave policies are important here. People in the U.K. work the longest hours in Europe. A fairer share of work, perhaps through greater job sharing, could benefit both those who are short on income and those who are short on time.

But as has long been argued, the critical policy lever in this area is still childcare. Affordable, universal, quality childcare is what enables the far more equal distribution of paid and unpaid work in the Scandinavian countries, and their low rates of child poverty. That this is a familiar point does not diminish its importance. The OECD's 2011 report on families across Europe points out once again Britain's high childcare costs, and the costs of paying for childcare threaten to derail the promise of the Universal Credit to 'make work pay'.

Region: Europe ^[3]

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