

Children and Poverty - A Norwegian Context

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The concept of poverty is abstract and needs definition to have any meaning in the real world. Poverty is relative and therefore dependent on its context. To be poor in Norway is not the same as being poor in a developing country. Numerous factors contribute to poverty, including political, economic, social, and cultural. Poverty can be understood as a low standard of living compared to other individuals, or as a deprivation of basic needs. Poor families and children are usually defined through objective measures. To combat poverty, there is a common political and professional agreement that this requires efforts at the political, societal and individual levels, and that many parties are responsible for solving the problem.

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The Concept of Poverty

Historically there have been numerous definitions of the concept of poverty. Now it is common to define it in terms of absolute poverty or relative poverty. Absolute poverty or destitution refers to the deprivation of basic human needs: food, water, sanitation, clothing, shelter, health care and education. Relative poverty is defined contextually as a poor standard of living or low income compared to what is common in the society where the individual lives (UN Glossary). UNICEF (2010) defines children living in poverty as those who experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential or participate as full and equal members of society. A measure of extreme absolute poverty is set by The World Bank at US \$ 1.50 per day, but this is controversial.

It is obvious that this kind of poverty measure is not relevant for countries like Norway. A more significant measure of poverty might be based upon the shortage of important welfare goods and linked to children's well-being. The

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UN has made a list of 14 fundamental goods important for children (age one to sixteen) in developed/rich countries (UNICEF, 2012):

1. Three meals a day.
2. At least one meal a day with meat, chicken or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent).
3. Fresh fruit and vegetable every day.
4. Books suitable for the child's age and knowledge level (not including schoolbooks).
5. Outdoor leisure equipment.
6. Regular leisure activities.
7. Indoor toys and games (at least one per child).
8. Money to participate in school trips and other activities.
9. A quiet place with enough room and light to do homework.
10. An internet connection.
11. Some new clothes.
12. Two pairs of properly fitted shoes.
13. The opportunity to invite friends home to play and eat.
14. The opportunity to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays, name days, religious events etc.

1,9 % of children in Norway do not have these needs fulfilled (lacking two or more items), while the percentage in Romania is 70 (UNICEF, 2012).

However, Norway, like most of the industrial and developed countries, measures poverty through median income: i.e. the amount of income which divides the income distribution in a nation's population into two equal groups – half having income below that amount and half above. OECD defines the poverty threshold at 50 % of median income and EU at 60 %. In Norway it is common to use the EU standard of 60 % taking the number of household members into account. It is fair to question this measure of poverty. Taking Norway as an example, the salaries are among the highest in Europe. A median income of 60 % is therefore quite a lot of money.

Child poverty in Norway is increasing: from 4 % of children living in families with income below 60 % of median (1996–1998) to 8 % in 2007–2009 (SSB, 2012). This is a problematic trend in a welfare state. It has, however, been argued that the increase has happened because the income median has moved upwards. There might be different reasons for this: First is of course the overall rise of income. Second, that more and more households have two salaries due to working women. Third, there are many highly educated and skilled workers in Norway with corresponding high incomes. Of course, a high average and median income also influences the price level. Housing prices and the cost of living seem for many to be extremely high in Norway, consequently people require a high income.

In a report from UNICEF (2012), the problems of using income as a measure for poverty is discussed; *inter alia* the reliability of data about incomes (including conversion of household income into equivalent individual income), the connection between income and housing costs, and similarly between income and available resources, the level of subsidisation of health services, education etc., and unequal competence of families to manage and prioritise income. In debates about poverty in Norway, critics of the measurement methods based on a given percentage of median income, also claim that Norwegian families and children are not really poor by most standards, but the method of calculation defines them as poor.

Who are the Children and Families in Poverty?

Regardless of measures, Norway is among the countries with 'less risk of poverty'. Nobody dies due to poverty alone, but the standard of living in poor families can be greatly reduced compared to other families. A child is a part of and dependent upon its family. Norwegian research (Nadim & Nielsen, 2009; Kristofersen & Clausen, 2008; Lorentzen & Nielsen, 2008) and public documents (NAV, 2013; SSB, 2013) show that child poverty impacts particularly on children whose parents have little education and are unemployed. Children in large families (three children or more), single parent families, and families dependent on social welfare are also vulnerable. There are also geographical differences. Additionally, young people might live temporarily in poverty until they are established in adult life. Children in families who have emigrated from Non-Western countries are also at greater risk of poverty. The reason for this is often a combination of large families and weak connections to economic life. Around 39 % of children in low income families live in immigrant families in Norway (2007–2009), and in some districts in the capital of Oslo, nine out of ten children in poverty belong to these families. Research also shows that there is a high risk that poverty, social differences and social exclusion is transferred between generations.

The UN and the Convention

Article 27 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that: '*Every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical, social and mental needs. Government must help families who cannot afford to provide this*'.

In 2005, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern about the high proportion of immigrant children in Norway living in households with long-term low income. The committee recommended that Norway ensures that all children have their needs fulfilled, and make every effort necessary so that no group of children lives in poverty (Comments to Norway, 3rd periodic report). The Committee also commented on the poverty issue in

Norway in 2010 (Comments to Norway 4th periodic report), and recommended efforts to protect children living in poverty against the detrimental consequences of such a situation, particularly through specific early care and education, targeted programs in school to compensate deficits of development and learning, measures for better nutrition and health of children from disadvantaged groups and efforts to make municipal housing more child-friendly. The Committee furthermore urged efforts to ensure that poor families receive adequate assistance, independent of where they are living in Norway.

How to Combat Child Poverty?

Many political parties in Norway, as well as other political and professional organisations and NGOs are concerned about child poverty, and about the increasing number of families and children living in poverty. How to avoid child poverty is frequently debated.

Political level

There is political consensus that it is important to combat child poverty, and to take the recommendations from the UN seriously. It is also agreed that living in long-term poverty is worse than living in families with temporary low income. A white paper was issued in 2006 – an action plan on how to combat poverty. The paper also dealt with the situation for children in poverty. The main right for children stated in the paper was: *All children shall have the possibility to participate in society and develop*. Five measures to combat poverty and fulfil set goals were written in the plan: 1) Initiatives to reduce social differences in access to the education system, 2) Special efforts for minority children to learn Norwegian, 3) Initiatives that contribute to an inclusive childhood, 4) Special initiatives aimed at reducing child poverty, and 5) Other initiatives for vulnerable children and youth (Arbeids – og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2006).

Professional level – social work

Child poverty and the role of social workers is another issue discussed in Norway. Child poverty is seen as a complicated social problem caused by different factors. Social work theory is based on an eclectic and holistic understanding of problems, and social workers' training in systems theory gives them a significant basis for understanding the nature of poverty and its roots. Social workers meet the poor families and their children. They should be able to recognise characteristics describing these families and their living conditions and have enough resources to help them better their situation. The importance of training social workers to discover children stigmatised and marginalised because of poverty and to help them to secure a good childhood and prevent further problems, is also emphasised.

Voluntary/NGO level

Many NGOs have child poverty on their agenda. 'Save the Children Norway' is an example. This organisation is concerned about the increasing number of families in poverty, and the way it affects children, in welfare states as well, such as Norway. In their view, it is important to understand that child poverty is not only about social needs and the lack of goods and services, or comparing their own situation with that of the rich. They emphasise that child poverty is primarily the lack of possibilities to take part in activities equal to other children. In a society where it increasingly costs money to grow up, low household income will make it difficult for children to participate in activities like other Norwegian children. A low income can thus lead to the social exclusion of children. 'Save the Children Norway' is focused on children in the debate about poverty, and lets the child participate and be able to use their own voice in the discussions (Save the Children Norway, 2013).

Concluding Remarks

A significant measure of child poverty is not having one's basic needs fulfilled. The concept of 'basic' often means material, educational and access to health services. However, the debate also deals with how child poverty might affect social exclusion, marginalisation and other significant factors that can deprive the child of having a satisfactory childhood.

The way to avoid and combat child poverty is of course to provide families with enough resources so that they can maintain a satisfactory standard of living compared to other Norwegian families. Equally important are initiatives to avoid social exclusion and marginalisation. A significant initiative is to provide everybody access to education, which is seen as decisive for children so that they can grow up to be participating and responsible adults in society, and avoid poverty later in life.

Child poverty is a social problem and an important issue for social workers. In their work, they meet families and children living in poverty. They are trained to make reliable assessments. It is important that social workers take professional responsibility and do not accept that children live in poverty. They must explain the situation, provide proper help and cooperate with significant others in the process of helping. Social workers should also be involved in work that aims to combat poverty.

An important question is if the concept of child poverty should be revitalised, and a more multi-dimensional approach taken, i.e. looking at a combination of different factors that affect the child's living conditions negatively. Factors at the emotional level should also be emphasised: e.g. emotional care, the child's feeling of happiness, being loved and safe, and the sense of well-being, belonging and predictability.

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