

Poverty and children's rights, civic and political engagement

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Poverty impacts directly and adversely on children and young people's ability and opportunity to engage meaningfully in civic and political activity. While at a general level, children's rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (CRC) which may provide a lever by means of which to alleviate poverty, it remains the case that children growing up in poverty are significantly disadvantaged in their ability to mobilise their own rights. This briefing sets out the evidence from policy and research on these issues and makes a number of recommendations.

Key points

- ❖ A formal, legislative commitment has been made by a previous UK Government to reduce child poverty drastically by 2020. The obligation continues to apply, but no sanction is imposed for failure to comply.
- ❖ It is estimated that, from a 2011/12 baseline, the number of Scottish children living in poverty over the next five years may increase by as many as 100,000.
- ❖ Children growing up in poverty may be prevented from taking part in activism via the internet by lack of access to a computer or by the fact that such activity is frequently unpaid.
- ❖ Young people from lower socio-economic households are less likely to engage in volunteering opportunities and are therefore less likely to enjoy the benefits volunteering can bring.
- ❖ In 2013, 11.9% of 16–19 year-olds in Scotland were not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). A considerable body of research has linked socio-economic disadvantage and poverty with youth unemployment or being NEET.
- ❖ Long-lasting negative effects for young people of being NEET for significant periods of time include long-term unemployment or low-level employment, churning between jobs and unemployment, as well as long-term poverty and social exclusion.

Key recommendations

- ❖ The UK Government should respect its commitment to the minimisation of child poverty, particularly in implementing any welfare cuts to avoid an increase. It should also set out consequences of failure to comply with targets set in the Child Poverty Act 2010.
- ❖ The UK Government should ratify the 3rd Protocol to the CRC to provide a mechanism by which Scottish children can communicate rights violations.
- ❖ The Scottish Government should commit to removing barriers to volunteering opportunities and to providing better information to broaden the image of volunteering.
- ❖ Volunteer-involving organisations should avoid any negative assumptions about young people's interests and aspirations and offer support to help them participate.
- ❖ In tackling NEETness, the government, local authorities and third sector organisations should seek to ensure equal access to economic, social and cultural resources. Young people in the NEET group experience a wide range of socio-economic inequalities, which affect negatively their opportunities to participate. All proposed interventions should recognise this.

1. Introduction

Around 20% (or 220,000) children live in poverty in Scotland today (Scottish Government, 2014a: Table A1). Poverty affects children's well-being and life chances in many adverse ways. In particular, it presents a barrier to their ability to exercise their rights, prevents them from taking part in extra-curricular activities (UNICEF 2011), and restricts their opportunities in respect of forms of civic engagement such as volunteering. Young people living in poverty are also over-represented in the NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) category (Community Links, 2010: 9). In 2013, 11.9% of 16 - 19 year olds were recorded as NEET (Scottish Government, 2014b). Both the Scottish and the UK Governments have recognised the importance of tackling child poverty in setting up advisory bodies (eg Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission (2011) at UK level; Ministerial Advisory Group on Child Poverty (2012) in Scotland), yet progress is, at best, slow and at worst, backwards.

In 2010, the then British government made an unequivocal commitment drastically to diminish child poverty by 2020. Today, it is estimated that, from a 2011/12 baseline, over 100,000 more children in Scotland may, instead, find themselves in poverty by 2020 (CPAG, 2015). The Institute for Fiscal Studies has expressed the view that, in implementing the current British Government's proposed cuts to the welfare budget (details of which are not yet finalised), low-income families with children would be hardest hit (IFS, 2015). Children and young people growing up in poverty need to be empowered to engage fully in civic life and to play their full part politically. It has been noted, for example, that more than half will have neither internet access at home, nor the use of a car available (McKendrick, 2014: Table 8.2). Inequalities which prevent them exercising their rights both under the CRC and more broadly need to be tackled.

This briefing looks at aspects of child poverty in Scotland today. It first considers what poverty means before moving to its implications for children's rights and their civic and political participation, concluding with some recommendations in relation to policy and practice.

2. Child poverty, civic and political engagement and children's rights – Overview

Poverty means "a level of deprivation heavily out of line with the general living standards enjoyed by the majority of the population ..." (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009: 13). Peter Townsend, one of Child Poverty Action Group's founders in the UK was an academic sociologist who worked extensively on the meaning and effects of poverty, particularly showing the divergence it creates with the standards customarily enjoyed in society. He said:

"Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong." (1979: 31)

Children living in poverty suffer many disadvantages – though it is important to recognise that the fact of coming from a family on a low income may not form any part of their self-identity (Sime, 2008: 65–66). As in Health (End Child Poverty, 2008) and Education (Sosu and Ellis, 2014), poverty has been recognised as a barrier to civic and political participation. Education for citizenship incorporates strands of civic and political engagement and is a key plank of the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland’s schools, demonstrating its perceived importance for all Scotland’s school-age children.

Building on its *Developing Global Citizens* (2011: 11) resource, Education Scotland states on its website that citizenship education “addresses the exercising of rights and responsibilities within communities at local, national and global levels [and ...] encompasses the development of informed decision making, and the ability to take thoughtful and responsible action, locally and globally.” Despite these general aspirations, poverty directly affects the ability of children and young people to participate in civil society in a variety of ways, including internet activism, volunteering and access to education, training and employment. As McKendrick (2014: 151) notes, such participation “is a fundamental right to which many people experiencing poverty have less experience and access.”

With reference to rights, it has been described as “little short of revolutionary” (Freeman, 1991: 212) that children should have rights at all, but the CRC – the most ratified convention in the world – confers on all children a variety of rights, including a number which should operate directly to protect them from the effects of poverty. Despite this, it is widely recognised that poverty itself operates to prevent children from exercising their rights.

This paper will now consider some of the ways in which poverty impacts on the ability of children and young people in Scotland to exercise their rights and to engage politically and in the civil society. In so doing, it will cover barriers to participation in volunteering and young people’s over-representation in the category of Not in Employment, Education and Training (NEET).

3. Rights

“Child poverty is an affront to human dignity, and therefore seems to be blatantly in violation of the human rights of children” (Vandenhoe, 2013: 611)

The United Kingdom has ratified the CRC. A number of rights which children acquire under the CRC relate directly to protecting them against poverty. Among them, Art 2 prohibiting discrimination on, *inter alia*, the ground of property; Art 24 giving children the right “to the highest attainable standard of health”, Art 26 conferring the right to benefit from social security and perhaps most importantly, Art 27 which “recognize[s] the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development”. In addition, the CRC accords other rights to children which recognise their potential political activism including rights to freedom of expression (Art 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Art 14) and freedom of association (Art 15).

At one level, then, children look to be well protected, but it is recognised that “an obvious generic example of a root cause, or at least a frequent context of, many child rights violations is poverty” (Arts, 2014: 295). Unlike the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the UK has not incorporated the CRC directly into domestic law and, until recently, the main enforcement mechanism generally was the five-yearly report produced by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Accordingly, the promise of these rights as a means of alleviating poverty (Vandenhoe, 2013) may have been greater than their practical efficacy.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child last reported on the United Kingdom in 2008. At that time, in its response on Art 27, it noted its concern that “poverty [was] a very serious problem affecting all part of the United Kingdom,” (para 64) and recommended that, when necessary, the UK should “intensify its efforts to provide material assistance and support programmes for children, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing” (para 66). More generally, the Committee took the view that the then increases in spending on children were “not sufficient to eradicate poverty and tackle inequalities” (para 18).

In relation to Art 4 (requiring States Parties to take the necessary action to implement the CRC), it therefore recommended that the UK should “allocate the maximum extent of available resources for the implementation of children’s rights, with a special focus on eradicating poverty and that it reduce inequalities across all jurisdictions” (para 19). The Scottish NGO Together (Scottish Alliance for Children’s Rights), which brings together a number of organisations working in the area, continues to monitor the implementation of the CRC in Scotland. In its 2014 Report, it remained concerned about the impact of poverty, particularly in relation to access to health services (page 67). It also noted that “[c]hildren living in poverty are experiencing significant violations of their right to education” (page 5; Ellis and Sosu, 2014) under Art 28 of the CRC.

Scotland has a Commissioner for Children and Young People, whose general function is to promote and safeguard their rights. He (currently the position is held by Mr Tam Baillie) is empowered to investigate certain aspects of service provision, in relation to children’s rights, interests and views. This power will be extended from the current situation, where he can do so only where the issue relates to children and young people generally or to particular groups to cover investigations in relation to the rights of individual children. (Commissioner for Children and Young People Scotland Act 2003, sections 7, which will be amended by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, section 5 (not yet in force).

In 2014, the 3rd Optional Protocol to the CRC came into force. This provides, for the first time, a mechanism whereby individuals or groups who consider that their rights under the CRC have been violated can bring this to the attention of the UN Committee, which will seek to broker a friendly settlement between the victim(s) and the State in question. While this provides the rudiments of an enforcement mechanism, to date, the UK Government has not even signed, let alone ratified the Protocol, so this protection is not available to children in Scotland.

4. Engagement

Civic engagement is an aspect of citizenship and is perhaps most obviously identified in volunteering, however, it is also a mean of building social capital by which is meant, in its simplest terms, the value drawn from pulling together all of the networks to which individuals belong and the tendency to offer assistance to each other. Political engagement is exemplified in any activity which has an impact in the political sphere. Perhaps, most obviously, it encompasses voting, but it is clearly broader and would include actions such as becoming a member of a political party or joining a protest march. The CRC affords to children a right of general participation in terms of Article 12, which can underpin their engagement activities. States which are party to the Convention are required to “assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child [and] ... in particular [to] provide[...] the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child,”

One way in which children and young people might seek to engage politically is via the internet. There are examples of this such as TakingITGlobal.com (<http://www.tigweb.org/about/>), which describes itself as “one of the world’s leading networks of young people learning about, engaging with and working towards tackling global challenges.” Democratic Audit UK (2015) has noted, in the context of political participation that “young people increasingly use the internet to get their voices heard”. Poverty remains a major barrier to this form of activism. At the most basic level, 50% of young people growing up in poverty are unlikely to live in homes where a computer is owned (McKendrick et al, 2014). In addition, a major European research project into the use of the internet for political activism by young people reported that the reliance on “volunteer” (ie unpaid) labour on websites created for these purposes operated to exclude poorer youth (aged 15 and over), who are generally underpaid in all spheres (Banaji et al, 2009: 5).

Volunteering nonetheless remains a significant mechanism by which young people can participate in civil society and it will be considered next.

5. Volunteering

Participation in volunteering has been linked to numerous favourable outcomes, such as enhanced social capital (Putman, 2000) and confidence (Eley, 2003) as well as broadening networks and easing life transitions (Newton *et al*, 2011). While a causal link between volunteering and employment is difficult to establish (Ellis Paine *et al*, 2013), research has found that volunteering can support some of the underlying factors individuals require in order to participate in the labour market (NCVO, 2014). Given the lower levels of social capital found in the most deprived

parts of Scotland (Ormston & Reid, 2012), volunteering provides young people with the opportunity to develop skills and engage in their communities.

Access to volunteering opportunities, however, is not equal, with participation rates at their lowest in lower income households and the most deprived parts of the country (Scottish Government, 2014f). Barriers to volunteering exist on both the supply and demand side (Gaskin, 2004). On the former, lack of time, the unpredictability of young people's lives, lack of confidence and the need to earn money rather than volunteer can all be issues. On the latter, organisational criteria around minimum age limits, the negative attitudes of adults and low expectations of young people can hinder participation. In addition to this, psychological barriers, such as the negative image of volunteering, and practical barriers, such as poor follow-up of new recruits and lack of accessible information can prevent participation (Smith *et al*, 2004).

Research in England, focusing on volunteering rates since the financial crash in 2008, has noted a fall in participation, particularly among disadvantaged communities, which was partly explained by poor organisational infrastructure (Lim & Laurence, 2015). This finding highlights the necessity of ensuring practical and appropriate volunteer opportunities exist for young people to participate in. In addition to 'demand side' issues, the values young people hold are also important in shaping how they engage with volunteering (Sundeen & Raskoff, 1995). Recognition must be given to the contention that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may exhibit prosocial behaviours in different ways to those from middle-class backgrounds (Lichter *et al*, 2002). Indeed, research with socially excluded adults has found bureaucratic and professionalised approaches to volunteering to be off-putting and alienating (Smith *et al*, 2004).

It is therefore important to listen to how young people think about volunteering and what they want from it. Moreover, given that exposure to childhood poverty, particularly for girls, has been found to be negatively linked with later prosocial behaviour, such as volunteering (Lichter *et al*, 2002), it is vital to ensure young people grow up with access to the support and resources required to participate in volunteering opportunities. While young people should not be forced to volunteer, indeed their resistance to such attempts has been outlined (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2013), it is important to ensure that access to opportunities are not dependent on the area a young person comes from or their (lack of) experiences of poverty.

6. Young People who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs)

Civic and political engagement may also enhance a sense of social inclusion. By contrast, NEETs – young people aged 16 – 19 who are not in Education, Employment or Training – are more likely to share certain characteristics (such as living in disadvantage), to struggle to make successful transitions and, consequently, may experience exclusion in various forms.

In 2013, nearly 12% of 16–19 year olds were NEET. Equally, it must be noted that the newest data on school-leaver destinations indicates that 91.7% of 2013/14 leavers had reached ‘positive destinations’ by March 2015 (Scottish Government, 2015:7; Hepburn, 2015). This may impact on the overall NEET statistics when these are next published in July 2015 (Scottish Government, 2014b).

Nonetheless, over 20% of young people aged 16–24 were unemployed in 2013 – in contrast to around 6% of unemployed adults (Scottish Government, 2014c). Unfortunately, Scotland remains amongst the OECD countries with one of the highest levels of young people who are not in education, employment or training, even though the attainment level has been gradually rising (Adams, 2012).

There is now a considerable body of research linking socio-economic inequalities and poverty with youth unemployment or being NEET. The experience of being NEET (especially for longer periods of time) can further lead to a range of negative consequences such as: poverty or social exclusion (Simmons and Thomson, 2011), long-term unemployment (Coles et al., 2002) or poorer physical and mental health outcomes (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Maguire and Rennison, 2005). As such, being NEET, is argued, can have a ‘scarring’ effect on individuals and adversely to influence well-being (Britton et al., 2011; Maguire and Rennison, 2005).

For these (and some other) reasons, the population of young people not in Education, Employment or Training remains a great concern for policy makers (Russel et al., 2014). A number of policy initiatives have been implemented in Scotland, in particular *More Choices, More Chances* (Scottish Executive, 2006), *Opportunities for All* (Scottish Government, 2014d) and *Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy* (Scottish Government, 2014e), which aim to prevent young people from becoming NEET in the first place, reduce their numbers and also to tackle some of the problems experienced by NEET youth. Yet, in spite of the growing body of policy and practice interventions, socio-economic inequalities, experiences of poverty, living in disadvantage and deprived areas adversely affect educational and vocational opportunities of the NEET population (Dumbleton and McPhail, 2012).

7. Key Recommendations Explained

In this final section of the Briefing Paper, the Key Recommendations outlined at the beginning are discussed in more detail.

In 2010, the then Labour UK Government passed the Child Poverty Act of that year which sets clear and (apparently) absolute targets for the drastic reduction of rates of child poverty by 2020. These are imposed on the Secretary of State, but it is not clear what, if anything, will happen if they are not met (Reid, 2012). As some reports suggest that child poverty is “on course for the biggest rise in a generation” (Doward and Helm, 2015:1), the UK Government should provide details of mechanisms by which these obligations are to be enforced and of the consequences of failure to comply. Given that the 2010 obligations remain in force, it is similarly

important that the Government should respect them in formulating detailed policy around its manifesto commitment to make further radical reductions to the welfare budget.

All children and young people, and particularly those growing up in lower income homes, should have access to mechanisms by which to report violations of their rights. To this end, it is strongly recommended that the UK Government should ratify the 3rd Optional Protocol to the CRC Protocol as soon as possible so that a route exists to bring these matters to the attention of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for friendly settlement.

The most recent figures for volunteering in Scotland, taken from a representative sample of young people aged 11–18, found a high level of participation (45%) and a largely favourable attitude towards volunteering (Volunteer Scotland, 2015). While there are not clear figures for young people in poverty, research suggests participation is lower in deprived areas and in lower income households. The Government should fulfil its aim of removing barriers to volunteering, improving its image and helping facilitate the creation of accessible and attractive opportunities for young people from all backgrounds (Scottish Executive, 2004). The acronym FLEXIVOL has been developed to highlight the things young people want from volunteering: flexibility, legitimacy, ease of access, experience, incentives, variety, organisation and laughs (Gaskin, 1998). Volunteer-involving organisations should work towards implementing these aspects when working with young people.

It has been widely acknowledged that one of the strands diversifying young people's lives relates to differences in access to various forms of resources (capitals): economic (wealth), social (social networks) and cultural (knowledge, skills and qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986; Furlong, 2013; Pierrie and Hockings, 2012). In consequence, those most disadvantaged in terms of access to such resources are more likely to struggle to make successful transitions – from education to employment; from dependency to independent living; from childhood to adulthood – and therefore more likely become NEET (Furlong, 2013).

Being Not in Education, Training or Employment should not be seen or understood as an active choice young people make or as the effect of negative attitudes they might inherit (Macdonald et al., 2014). Rather, it remains crucial to recognise dynamic and structural processes that facilitate reproduction of inequalities within the wider society, in particular – the damaging impact of poverty on young people's life chances, educational attainment, career opportunities and in the broadest term – their transitions (France, 2008). In order to successfully tackle NEETness, all parties (government; local authority; third sector etc.) should seek to ensure equal and fair access to economic, social and cultural resources (Pierrie and Hockings, 2012). All proposed interventions should recognise this in the first place, as the impact of existing initiatives (such as *More Choices, More Chances*, 2006) remains adversely affected by experiences of poverty, income inequality, deprivation or social injustice (Dumbleton and McPhail, 2012).

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