

Ending child poverty: a right or a responsibility?

This year the European Union will publish its Recommendation on Child Poverty. This is expected to be based on three ‘pillars’ – access to adequate resources, access to services and opportunities, and children’s participation – and to argue for a strong rights-based approach to eradicating child poverty. In 2011, the current coalition administration published the first government child poverty strategy in the UK. At its heart, lies a commitment to ‘strengthening families, encouraging responsibility, promoting work, guaranteeing fairness and providing support to the most vulnerable’. Stephen Crossley and Tracy Shildrick explore these two very different approaches.

Introduction

In December 2010, the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion announced that it would issue its Recommendation on Child Poverty in 2012. We worked with Councillor Doreen Huddart to produce a report in support of this for the Committee of the Regions, the European Union’s (EU’s) assembly of local and regional representatives.¹ The framework was first presented in a paper to the EU Presidency Conference in 2010, and it is this document, along with the final report of the same conference, that provides the basis for much of the discussion of the EU approach in this article.² Running parallel with the European process, in April 2011 the UK government published its

own child poverty strategy, *A New Approach: tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families’ lives*.

A rights-based approach to tackling child poverty is strongly advocated by the EU. It suggests that:³

Child poverty and social exclusion are a denial of children’s fundamental human rights, which can affect their development today and undermine the realisation of their full potential in the future. An approach to poverty based on fundamental rights shifts the focus from needs and charity to ensuring socially and legally guaranteed entitlements for children.

In contrast, while the UK strategy acknowledges that the EU approach is ‘in line with our duties under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (UNCRC),⁴ it makes no further mention of children’s rights throughout its entire 79 pages. Rather, the UK strategy relies heavily on the concept of personal responsibility as the main mechanism for tackling child poverty. Most of the emphasis is towards tackling what are argued to be the ‘causes’ of poverty and thus, it asserts that a new approach is needed ‘with a focus on fairness and personal responsibility, not cash hand-outs’. It is suggested that parental employment results in ‘a positive role model, a healthier and happier family, and a more stable home life’ and thus poverty is deemed to be best tackled by an approach that ‘helps people work themselves out of poverty... that rewards responsibility, not a hand-out culture’.

Both the EU Recommendation and the UK strategy are based around three central themes. The ‘pillars’ of the Recommendation relate to ‘adequate resources’, ‘access to services’ and ‘children’s participation’.⁵ The focus of the UK strategy is not dissimilar, but is framed towards ensuring ‘financial independence’, ‘supporting family life and children’s life chances’ and ‘the role of place and transforming lives’. The different terms are symptomatic of very different discourses that are inherent within each approach.

Professor John Veit-Wilson describes discourse as ‘a particular way of thinking and talking

about a subject used by those with powers of various kinds' which may be used 'deliberately to pre-empt the possibility of other ways of thinking and talking about the subject, to invalidate the perceptions and devalue the experiences of those without relevant powers'.⁶ It is interesting to note, therefore, that the EU documents focus on factors which lie beyond the control of individual families – eg, the 'adequate resources' pillar which suggests that families have the right to a certain level of security and, furthermore, that the state has a crucial role to play in trying to ensure this can happen. In contrast, the UK strategy suggests that the means of achieving these outcomes lie more directly in challenging and changing individual behaviour and encouraging parental responsibility, while limiting the role of the state. It is worth examining the three central pillars characterising both approaches more closely to see how these narratives have been constructed.

Income

Both approaches recognise that poverty is 'multi-dimensional'⁷ and that child poverty is 'about far more than income'.⁸ For the EU, however, the state is important in providing 'adequate resources' for families and it is strongly supportive of the possibility of governments 'guaranteeing an adequate income for all children'.⁹ Indeed, it has been noted that for 'the EU as a whole, the child poverty risk is reduced by 39 per cent as a result of social transfers'.¹⁰ Universal child benefits 'are the best way of providing income support to families with children' and 'should be received automatically and coupled with targeted benefits for those most in need', according to EU documents.¹¹

It was this sort of approach that characterised the previous Labour government's child poverty reduction strategy in the UK, when particular impetus was given to providing in-work benefits, and analysis shows that this was the 'biggest driver of reduced child poverty'.¹² The coalition is taking a different approach, which, to a large extent, reflects its different view of the welfare state. It is keen to reduce the burden of tax credits, and its approach to child poverty, as with its more general welfare reforms, is based on a belief that the provision of social security tends to encourage dependency. As a result, the coalition aims to 'remove financial disincentives', tackle 'entrenched benefit dependency' and reward 'people who do the right thing and work themselves out of poverty'.¹³

Because the strategy is built on a flawed view that the workless need to be encouraged (or, if encouragement fails, forced) to take work, the

approach is almost wholly directed towards changing the behaviour – and encouraging greater 'responsibility' – of workless parents as a means of resolving child poverty.

Services

It is in the area of improvements to services that the approaches of the EU and the UK are most similar. However, the EU rights-based approach highlights the importance of improving access to universal services for the poorest families, while the UK approach highlights the need to *target* services towards the 'most disadvantaged'.

Each of the services highlighted by the EU is covered by articles within the UNCRC, which makes explicit the links between tackling poverty and guaranteeing certain children's rights. This approach enables the EU to draw attention to some of the long-standing structural issues which many accept lie at the heart of entrenched inequality. For example, early childhood services can be 'adversely affected when childcare workers are not valued and have a low status',¹⁴ and 'education is often too dominated by middle-class perspectives and reflects and reinforces wider inequalities in society'.¹⁵

The UK strategy also focuses on early childhood services, but with approaches directed again at changing an individual's behaviour. Of course, in respect of child poverty, what is really meant here is a desire to change parental behaviour. Thus, the UK strategy focuses closely on ways of 'supporting positive home environments', 'reducing the impact of family breakdown', 'improving parents' learning and skills' and 'supporting families with multiple problems'. In doing so, families experiencing poverty are pathologised. By arguing that 'what is needed is a much wider culture change towards recognising the importance of parenting',¹⁶ the strategy rather unfortunately begins to fall very quickly into the popular, but completely erroneous, trap of equating child poverty with poor and irresponsible parenting. There is no acknowledgement, for example, that providing for children on a very low income makes parenting a very difficult task; nor is there any reference to the significant body of research which shows that parents on low incomes invest an enormous amount of personal effort in trying to provide adequately for their children.¹⁷

Healthcare, housing and child protection services are all discussed by both approaches. The EU documents continue to highlight the importance of putting children first: 'Consideration of children's best interest should be integrated into city and territorial planning';¹⁸ 'developing more

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child and family-friendly hospitals (including through better training of professionals).¹⁹

The UK strategy, in contrast, either individualises the issues requiring change by focusing efforts on ‘tackling risky behaviours’ and ‘improving disadvantaged young people’s participation’ or highlights how wider public sector reform (and withdrawal) will ‘free up’ or empower services, communities and individuals to bring about positive change in their lives.²⁰

We will empower schools to become drivers of progress, building on efforts to tackle barriers during pre-school years, by reducing bureaucracy, ensuring high levels of autonomy and freeing our teachers from constraint. The White Paper sets out how the Academy programme raises standards, particularly in disadvantaged areas, by giving power and freedom back to head teachers and teachers. Standards in disadvantaged areas will also be driven up by introducing the Free Schools programme, which makes it easier for charities, businesses, teachers and groups of parents to set up innovative new schools.

A smaller role for the state, leading to service providers and communities being ‘freed up’ is a central part of the ‘new approach’ in the UK. It is also almost exactly the opposite of the approach advocated by the EU, which, as we have seen, argues for an increased role for the state in ensuring basic minimum standards are provided for, and accessed by, families living in poverty.

Participation/empowerment

The issue of participation or empowerment is the third theme or pillar on which the two approaches are based. Again, there are noticeable differences between the two, with a strong emphasis on *children’s rights* within EU documents and a continued focus on *adult* participation within the UK strategy.

A child’s ‘right to be heard’ and her/his ‘participation in social, recreational, cultural, sporting and civic activities’ are the two strands of the EU approach, and a key message is the need to involve, understand and listen to children and young people with experience of poverty as part of the policy-making process:²¹

It is particularly important to enable children who face poverty and social exclusion to influence the decisions that affect them. Although there are obstacles to participation for all children, these are multiplied for children who are disadvantaged... They often feel stigmatised and discriminated against, and it

is likely that traditional approaches to consultation will fail to engage with them.

The UK strategy ‘relies on radical transformation of public services and the welfare state in order to tackle the causes of poverty head-on’ and focuses instead on community-level issues of empowerment, with ideas such as the ‘big society’ and localism being discussed. Examples of innovative approaches to tackling child poverty provided in the strategy include projects involving an investment bank, community entrepreneurs and local authority partners.

While the language of ‘empowering communities’, ‘increasing local control’ and ‘strengthening accountability’²² is difficult to argue with, it is noticeable that the government’s approach has not included the voice of those with direct experience of poverty. As the EU approach makes clear, empowerment should not be limited to scrutiny of political decisions and should include opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes.

The crucial difference between the two approaches in this theme is that the rights-based approach articulates the need for the state to involve children in the *design* of its services, whereas the responsibility approach suggests that actors other than the state should be involved with the *delivery* of services that were previously provided by the state

Conclusions

This comparison between the current EU and UK approaches illuminates the different discourses underlying attempts to tackle child poverty. The rights-based approach advocated by the EU:²³

... offers the potential to orientate current policy debates in positive directions. Primarily, the use of rights-based language shifts the focus within these debates from the personal failures of the ‘poor’ to a focus on the macro-economic structures and policies implemented by nation states and international bodies.

What such rights-based approaches to poverty offer which ‘needs-based’ approaches cannot, is a relational dimension that necessarily imposes a set of responsibilities on state actors and parties.²⁴

Children’s rights do not feature heavily in the UK strategy, but the document is heavily orientated towards approaches based on promoting individual behavioural change, in respect of attitudes towards work as well as issues around

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money management and, indeed, parenting itself. The rationale for the 'new approach' to child poverty is based on a view that the 'previous government attempted to hit poverty targets by paying out more and more in welfare payments' which 'exacerbated the problem by weakening incentives to work for some groups and preserving cycles of entrenched deprivation'. Efforts then become directed towards tackling 'entrenched benefit dependency' and the supposed 'hand-out culture' which creates and supports it.

While attention towards a supposed dependency culture has permeated governments from different political parties, the ideas are currently being used with renewed vigour since the formation of the coalition in 2010. These assertions not only misrepresent the attitudes of the workless but they also misconstrue the efforts undertaken by the previous Labour government to tackle child poverty, which focused mostly on directing increased welfare payments towards those working in low-paid jobs. Supplementing work that pays too little to take people away from poverty via state income transfers may not be ideal (even if it does remove some children from poverty) and the coalition is currently keenly reducing benefit payments to families in work (meaning many children will be plunged back into poverty).

Part of the problem is that the coalition government argues that it wishes to treat the symptoms of poverty rather than the causes, but its diagnosis of the causes is at best a partial, if not a complete, misdiagnosis. While in-work poverty is acknowledged, it is largely buried beneath a much more pervasive discourse of welfare dependency, drug or alcohol dependence, mismanagement of money, family breakdown and poor parenting. The argument that 'previous approaches to tackling child poverty have robbed people of their responsibility, leaving them dependent on a welfare state which 'hands out' cash and exacerbates problems' as well as that, what is needed, therefore, is an 'empowering' and 'supportive' approach that enables these families to 'work themselves out of poverty' and 'strengthen their parenting skills'²⁵ at best flies in the face of a wealth of evidence which shows that 'poor parenting' is not a 'driver' of child poverty.²⁶

The EU documentation takes a more rounded approach to tackling child poverty and we would argue that it is also much better supported by evidence. The UNCRC states that all countries should 'recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the

child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development'.²⁷ An approach to tackling child poverty that is based explicitly on a human rights framework offers opportunities to 'increase societal understanding of poverty and serve to include, within policy making, the voices of those who endure poverty' as well as establish 'a relationship between those living in extreme poverty and the nation state and therefore offers a mechanism to challenge unequal power relationships'.²⁸ Unfortunately, the UK approach, focusing on perceived parental failings and irresponsibility, falls far short of this. Perhaps this explains why, under the current coalition government, child poverty rates are projected to deteriorate rather than improve. ■

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- 1 Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Child Poverty, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 18 April 2012
- 2 Background paper to the EU Presidency Conference, 'Child Poverty and Child Well-Being', 2-3 September 2010, *Call for an EU Recommendation on Child Poverty and Child Well-being*, June 2010, and report on Belgian EU Presidency Conference 2-3 September 2010, *Who Cares? Roadmap for a recommendation to fight child poverty*
- 3 Background paper to the EU Presidency Conference, 'Child Poverty and Child Well-Being', 2-3 September 2010, *Call for an EU Recommendation on Child Poverty and Child Well-being*, June 2010
- 4 Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Education, *A New Approach to Child Poverty: tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families' lives*, 2011
- 5 See note 3
- 6 J Veit-Wilson, 'Horses for Discourses: poverty, purpose and closure in minimum income standards policy', in D Gordon and P Townsend (eds), *Breadline Europe: the measurement of poverty*, The Policy Press, 2000, pp141-64
- 7 See note 3
- 8 See note 4
- 9 Report on Belgian EU Presidency Conference 2-3 September 2010, *Who Cares? Roadmap for a recommendation to fight child poverty*
- 10 See note 3
- 11 See note 3
- 12 R Dickens, 'Child Poverty in Britain: past lessons and future prospects', in *National Institute Economic Review*, 2011
- 13 See note 5
- 14 See note 3
- 15 See note 3
- 16 See note 5
- 17 See, for example K Hamilton, 'Low-Income Families and Coping Through Brands: inclusion or stigma', *Sociology*, 2012
- 18 See note 3
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- 22 See note 5
- 23 S Pemberton, D Gordon and S Nandy, 'Child Rights, Child Survival and Child Poverty: the debate', in A Minujin and S Nandy, *Global Child Poverty and Well-being*, The Policy Press, 2012
- 24 See note 3
- 25 See note 5
- 26 See for example, PSE, *Consultation Response Social Mobility and Child Poverty Review*, ESRC, 2011
- 27 UNCRC, www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm
- 28 See note 3

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