A Children's Policy Centre Discussion Paper

The MOR for Children Framework

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Ensuring all children have the material basics; opportunities to participate, learn, and play; and strong, supportive relationships.

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Background

This paper presents new ways of conceptualising child poverty, in order to bring about action for change. It draws on research undertaken by the Children's Policy Centre and the Poverty and Inequality Research Centre at The Australian National University over the past fifteen years and on wider debates and research to propose an innovative multidimensional approach. It presents a framework – MOR for Children – that will move beyond the current, limited approaches to childhood poverty measurement to assess the numbers of children living in *multidimensional* poverty, to develop a child-centred understanding of the multiple impacts of poverty, and to support the design and evaluation of child-inclusive policies.

Beyond Income

Poverty is traditionally defined and measured as the lack of adequate income. The OECD defines the poverty rate as 'the ratio of the number of people (in a given age group) whose income falls below the poverty line; taken as half the median household income of the total population'.[1]

Over recent years, there has been considerable debate on the way in which poverty should be defined and measured. These debates have often focused on whether poverty should be understood as unidimensional or multidimensional. Unidimensional - or monetary - definitions and measures of poverty focus on either income or consumption. Multidimensional definitions are broader and include other aspects of life that are essential. One of the best-known measures of multidimensional poverty - the global Multidimensional Poverty Index - assesses three dimensions: health, education, and standard of living. The Individual Measure of Multidimensional Poverty, discussed further below, assesses across fourteen dimensions of life. Both the MPI and the IMMP were developed to focus on adult poverty. The MPI is now disaggregated by age and is able to assess the proportion of children living in multidimensional poverty, based on these three dimensions.[2]

There are several tools and approaches to assessing multidimensional child poverty, including the Bristol approach, UNICEF's Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA), and the more recent Child Multidimensional Deprivation Index. [3] While these measures represent important steps forwarding in understanding and responding more effectively to child poverty, most focus on material poverty and/or access to services, but do not include the non-material dimensions of poverty that are so important to children. While all draw on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, none are based on children's experiences or priorities. All rely on existing data, which removes the need to undertake field research or surveys, but does restrict what can be assessed.

While a lack of income is central to people's experiences of poverty, there is increasing recognition that poverty is more than income alone, and includes both material and non-material elements. Research over the past two decades has demonstrated that no one indicator (such as income) can capture the complexities of poverty, the multiple disadvantages that people experience, or the ways in which different dimensions of poverty interact to deepen deprivation. Understanding the multidimensional nature of poverty is now recognised as necessary if poverty is to be addressed. This is reflected in Goal 1.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals,

[1] OECD Poverty Rate. Available at https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm
[2] https://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Brief_46_Child_MPI_2017-1.pdf
[3] For an overview of each, see Bessell, S. (2021). Rethinking Child Poverty. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*. https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2021.1911969

which calls for the reduction by half the proportion of men, women, and children living in poverty in all its dimensions, according to national definitions.[4]

The recognition of multidimensional poverty in the first of the Sustainable Development Goals clearly directs national governments and international organisations to expand definitions of poverty beyond income alone, which places responsibility for adopting an appropriate definition of poverty on governments.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 1.2

By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and **children** of all ages living in **poverty in all its dimensions** according to national definitions

Debates about the definition and measurement of poverty matter because the way in which we define poverty determines how we understand the problem and how we respond. Measurement matters because it not only determines the extent and nature of the problem, if defines success or failure.

Learning from Past Research

In 2008, a team of researchers at the Australian National University commenced research that aimed to develop a new measure of poverty, which was just and justifiable and sensitive to the different ways in which women and men experience poverty. The resulting measure - and Individual Measure of Multidimensional Poverty (IMMP) - assesses fourteen dimensions of life (see Figure 1).[5] The dimensions of the IMMP were identified through rights-based research, using participatory methods, with over 2,000 women and men living in contexts of poverty across six countries.

Figure 1: Dimensions of the Individual Measure of Multidimensional Poverty

[4] See OPHI (2015). 'Measuring multidimensional poverty: Insights from around the world', OPHI Briefing 30, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), University of Oxford. Available at https://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Informing-Policy-brochure-web-file.pdf

[5] The IMMP was originally developed as the Individual Deprivation Measure. It is the result of research collaboration with several partners over time and funding support from the Australian Research Council and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Details of the measure, including its development, are available at immp.crawford.anu.edu.au.

That the IMMP is grounded in the experiences and priorities of people with lived experience of poverty is unique, as most mainstream measures of poverty are developed by experts and often based on data that currently exist. The Individual Measure of Multidimensional Poverty is designed to measure adult poverty, however, the lessons learned in developing that measure provide important insights for the development of a child-centred measure of poverty. Those lessons, and key findings from the relevant literature, are summarised below.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL

While low income is central to the experience of poverty, to understanding it, and to responding effectively, it is critically important to take a multidimensional approach. An individual's or a family's income can increase marginally - perhaps moving them beyond the poverty line - without significantly changing their life circumstances or impacting on the many dimensions within which poverty is experienced. Moreover, while some services - such as health care and education - can be purchased, decent quality services may not be available to some social groups even if they have increased income, often because of structural discrimination.

Importantly, assessing poverty as income alone cannot reveal the structural nature of poverty or the systems failures that keep some people trapped in poverty.

A multidimensional definition of poverty is especially important when conceptualising child poverty. Chzhen, Gordon and Handa have made the important point that some of the things that children need to flourish may require more than adequate individual or household income.[6] Examples include protection from harm, opportunities for play, and caring relationships.[7]

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

While poverty is understood to impact differently on individuals, it is often measured at the household level. This is because much of the data used to measure poverty are household level data. In some measures, calculations are undertaken to derive the levels of individual poverty, based on household data (often income). However, this approach makes two problematic assumptions. First, it assumes that one individual is able to provide information that is accurate and relevant for all others in the household. Second, it assumes that resources are shared equally across all household members.

Assessing poverty at the level of the individual, not the household, ensures that intra-household inequalities are not masked. Individual level assessment also enables aggregation from the individual to social groups, illuminating the ways in which particular characteristics (such as gender or age) shape the nature of poverty, and deepen the poverty of some groups.[8]

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[6] Chzhen, Y., Gordon, D. & Handa, S. (2018). Measuring Multidimensional Child Poverty in the Era of the Sustainable Development Goals. *Child Indicators Research, 11*, 707–709.
[7] Bessell, S. (2021). Rethinking Child Poverty. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*. https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2021.1911969
[8] Bessell. S. (2015). The Individual Deprivation Measure: measuring poverty as if gender and inequality matter. *Gender and Development, 23*(2), 223-240.

INTERSECTIONAL

The concept of intersectionality is important in understanding how povery plays out for different individuals and social groups, and why some groups experience deeper deprivation than others. While there are many, sometimes contradictory, definitions of intersectionality, Hill Collins and Bilge provide a useful explanation:

> *Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age - among others - as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences.*[9]

Intersectional analysis enables us to uncover the ways in which both systemic and everyday power relations and patterns of discrimination shape the nature, depth, and experience of poverty. It is possible to understand how, for example, age, gender, and race intersect to not only create poverty, but to shape individuals' experiences of poverty and determine social and government responses.

Intersectional analysis requires individual level data to aggregate up and identify how specific social groups are impacted.

RESPONSIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE

The reason to measure or analyse poverty must be to bring about action and, ultimately, change. This means that measures and frameworks for analysis must be rigorous and robust. They must also be responsive and accountable to those whose lives they seek to change. Our experience in developing the IMMP reinforces not only the value, but the necessity, of grounding measures and frameworks in the lived experiences and priorities of people who have experienced poverty daily. There is also great value in drawing on the experience and knowledge of organisations and groups that work to support people experiencing poverty and to end it. Rights-based research using participatory methods is one powerful means of ensuring that lived experience and expertise is reflected in a measure or framework for analysis.

POLICY RELEVANT

Research on poverty can only be justified if it aims to bring change, challenge the patterns of discrimination, disadvantage, and exclusion that create poverty, and influence policy. Here we draw on the words of David Piachaud, who argues 'the study of poverty is only ultimately justifiable if it influences individual and social attitudes and actions.'[10]

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[9] Hill Collins, P. & Wise, S. (2020). *Intersectionality* (2nd ed.), Polity

[10] Piachaud, D. (1987). Problems in the Definition and Measurement of Poverty. *Journal of Social Policy, 16*(2), 147-164 [p. 161].

Child Poverty in Australia

Income Poverty

Australia does not have an official poverty line, but the OECD definition is generally taken as the basis for assessing the number of people living in poverty. According to the OECD, people are classified as poor when their equivalised disposable household income is less than 50 percent of the median in that country.[11]

In 2020, based on the situation prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, researchers at the University of New South Wales found that 13.6 percent of people in Australia were living below the poverty line of 50 percent of median income. Almost one in six children up to the age of fifteen years (17.7 percent) were living in poverty.[12]

Children living in sole parent households are more likely to experience relative income poverty, and poverty is especially concentrated within single mother families. In 2017-18, just over 44 percent of children living in sole parent families were living in income poverty, compared to 12.7 percent of children in couple households. The reason for this is the very low rate of single parent payments and rigid conditionality for some recipients. Since 2013, single parents have been required to move from Single Parenting Payment to JobSeeker (previously New Start) when their youngest child turns eight years old. The introduction of this requirement resulted in a doubling of poverty among unemployed single parents. The policy disregards the critical role of parenting - for both individual children and families and for societies - and prioritises labour force participation over children's well-being.[13]

Within the OECD, child poverty is measured for the age group birth to 17 years. Table 1 shows poverty rates in all working-age households with at least one child. Australia, while ranked just above the average of OECD countries for which data were available in 2018, does poorly given the level of wealth within the country.

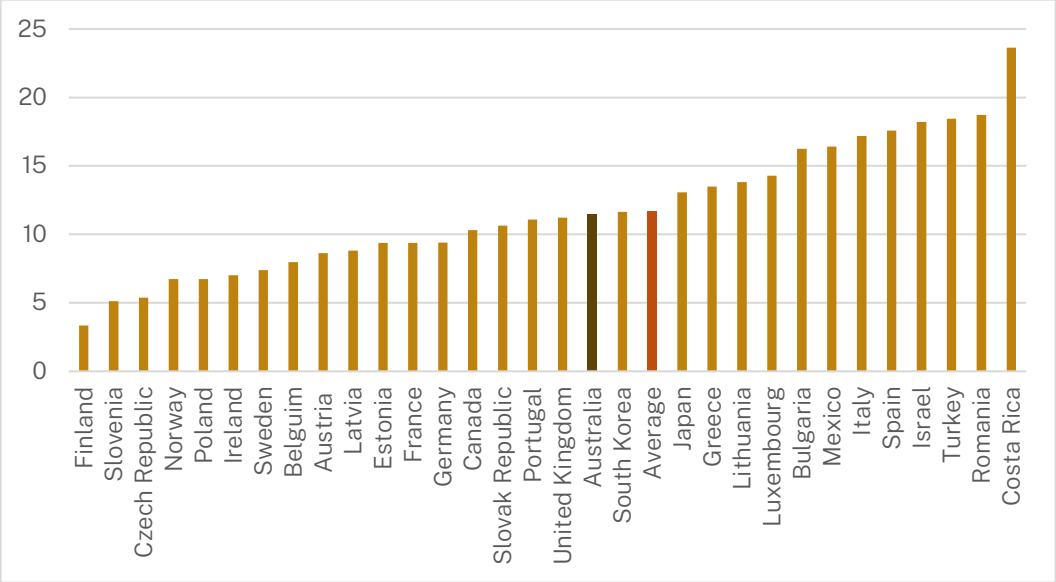

Table 1: Poverty Rates - All working-age households with at least one child (2018)

[11] OECD. (2016). *Society at a Glance 2016: OECD Social Indicators*. OECD Publishing: 104. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264261488-en

[12] http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty/

[13] Klein, E. (2021). When care is the focus of punitive welfare policy: ParentsNext. *Arena, 6*(June). Available at https://arena.org.au/missing-the-value-of-care/

Table 2 shows poverty rates within single adult households with at least one child. For these households, poverty rates are far higher than for all working-age households with at least one child. Poverty rates amongst single adult households with at least one child are very high in Australia; and considerably higher than the average of OECD countries for which data are available.

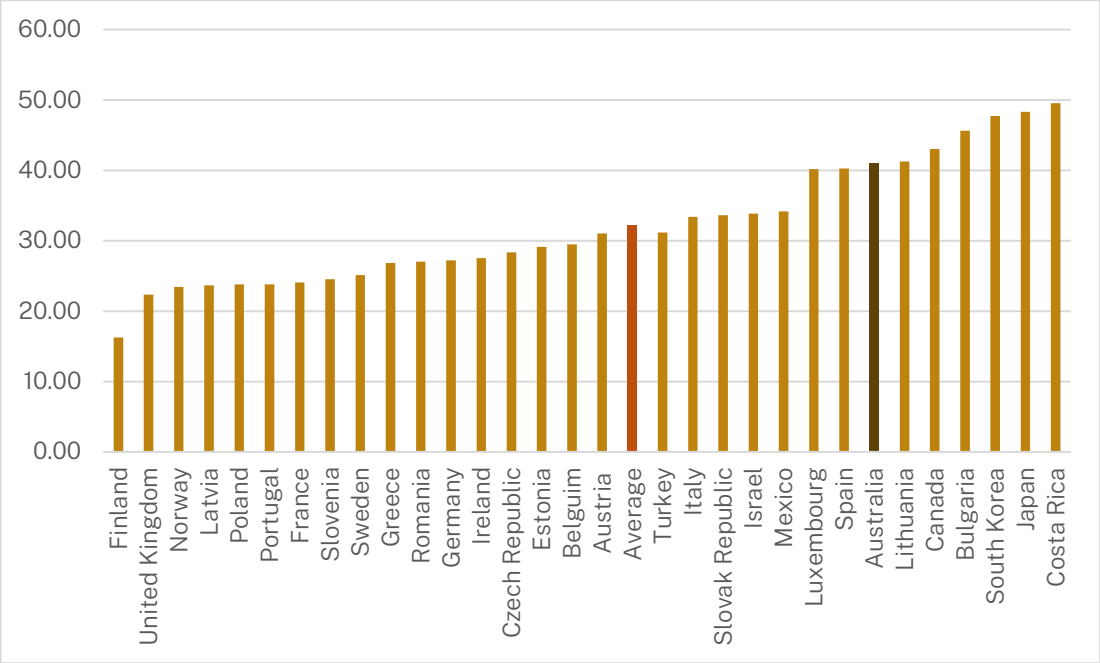

Table 2: Poverty Rates - Single Adult households with at least one child (2018)

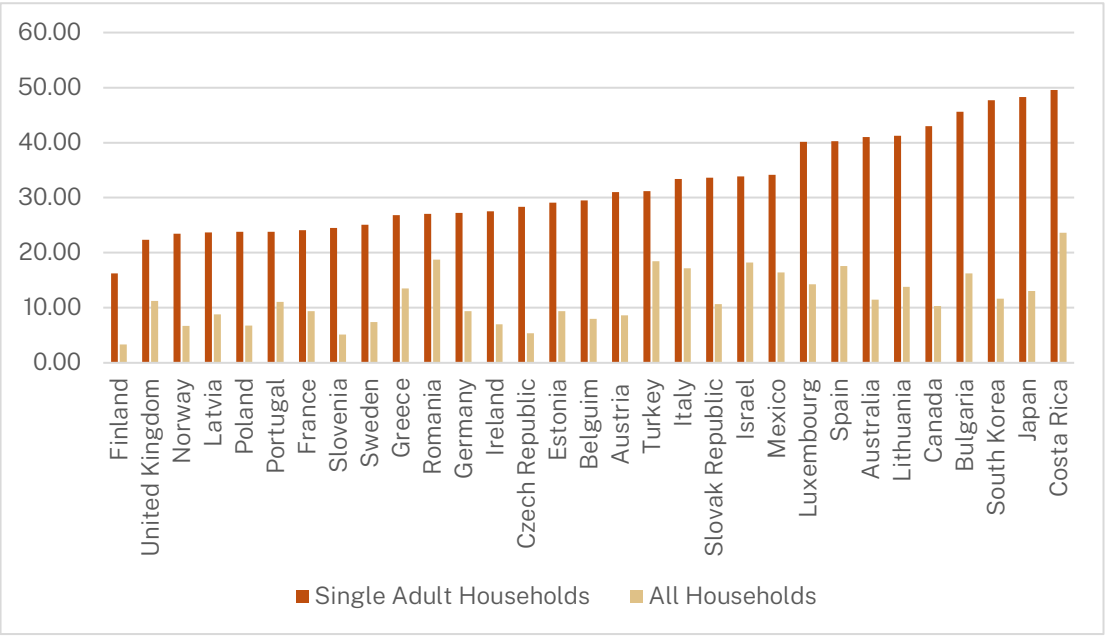

Table 3: Poverty Rates - Households with at least one child (2018)

Reducing income poverty requires income to be increased. In Australia, as elsewhere, a range of factors contribute to income poverty, including wage levels and available sources of income. In Australia, a major factor in contributing to income poverty is the low rate of benefits available to

those who are not in paid employment or rely on government benefits to supplement income from employment.

During 2020, in response to COVID-19 related lockdowns, the Australian Government significantly increased all working-age benefits. The temporary increases were designed to protect and support those who lost income because of the pandemic, and had the additional effect of lifting tens of thousands of Australian families who rely on government benefits out of poverty. With the withdrawal of the coronavirus supplements in March 2021, the majority of people receiving benefits were returned to poverty - and the rate of child poverty, which had temporarily decreased, returned to the high pre-COVID levels.[14] The permanent increase of $50 per fortnight to JobSeeker (previously New Start) from the end of March 2021 was insufficient to keep people out of poverty, given that it was the first increase to working age allowances in real terms in over twenty-five years.

A key cause of child poverty in Australia is the inadequacy of the social security system in keeping families with children - and particularly single parent families - above the poverty line.

Modelling undertaken by the Australian National University in 2021 indicated that a permanent increase of 20 percent in overall spending on social security would lower the poverty rate for households receiving government allowances for some or all of their income from 88 percent to just 26 percent. Among those receiving working age pensions, poverty would reduce from 45 percent to 11 percent. This would have a marked impact on child poverty rates, including within single parent families where poverty rates are very high.[15]

The discussion above highlights the value of measuring income poverty for children and families. It indicates the ways in which the social security system is failing to address income poverty for Australian children.

However, measuring income poverty alone does not reveal the full depth and breadth of poverty. There are (at least) five key questions that assessing child poverty by income cannot answer:

- **In what ways does insufficient income impact children?**

  Measuring income poverty tells us how many children are impacted but does not reveal how children are affected. Understanding the impact of low and insufficient income on children is critical, both for those living in households below 50 percent median income, and for those who are just above that cut-off, but still have insufficient income for a range of goods, services, and activities, despite being above 50 percent of median income.

- **What dimensions of poverty - in addition to inadequate income - impact children?**

  While income is a central feature of poverty, measuring poverty by income alone does not uncover its non-material dimensions, including social exclusion, feelings of shame and stigma, the emotional toll of deprivation, and the impact on relationships. Income poverty does not capture the trade-offs people must make between income and other valued resources (including time).

[14] Bessell, S. (2021). Australia was a model for protecting people from COVID-19 - and then we dumped half a million people back into poverty. The Conversation. August 11. Available at https://theconversation.com/australia-was-a-model-for-protecting-people-from-covid-19-and-then-we-dumped-half-a-million-people-back-into-poverty-165813

[15] Edwards, B. & Narayanan, V. (2021). *Financial Stress and Social Security Settings in Australia*. Centre for Social Research Methods, the Australian National University. Available at https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/5/FS_and_OPM_paper_SVA_PDF_0.pdf

- **How do different dimensions of poverty interact to compound the experience of poverty for children?**

  Low income interacts with other material and non-material dimensions of disadvantage to create multidimensional poverty. The interaction of different dimensions of poverty compounds and deepens the effects of poverty. This is not captured by assessing income alone, but is critical to children's lives - both now and in the future.

- **How can the structural drivers of child poverty be addressed?**

  As discussed above, the nature of poverty in Australia reveals how failures in the social security system exacerbate it. However, assessing monetary poverty alone does not fully reveal the structural and systemic causes, including low wage growth, precarious employment, unequal access to quality services, and patterns of discrimination. To address child poverty and support families, it is necessary that these drivers are fully understood *from a child standpoint*.

- **How can policies address – rather than reinforce – multidimensional child poverty?**

  A range of policies impact on the depth and nature of child poverty - from welfare reform to employment policies - yet the impact of these policies on children, and on child poverty, is rarely considered. Child-centred analysis, leading to child-inclusive policies, is essential to addressing child poverty.

- **What protective factors are in place to support children?**

  Addressing multidimensional child poverty requires policies that are supportive of children and their families and build on the strengths that exist within families and within communities. This requires deep understanding of both the deprivations that children experience and the supportive and protective factors that are already in place.

While income is an essential component of poverty, understanding and responding effectively to poverty requires complementary and supplementary approaches, over and above increasing income.

The following section introduces the MOR for Children Framework, a multidimensional framework for assessing child poverty, assessing policies for the impact on child poverty, and designing child-inclusive responses.

A New Approach: The MOR for Children Framework

The MOR for Children Framework is a new approach to conceptualising, defining, and responding to multidimensional child poverty.

Based on our research with children and young people, an extensive review of the relevant literature, and engagement with stakeholders, the Framework conceptualises poverty as having the following characteristics:

- It is both material and non-material, and has social and relational dimensions
- It shaped by gender, age/generation, ability/disability, race, and geographic location - as well as by class
- A binary poor/non-poor cut-off often fails to recognise the situation of people living just above the poverty line
- It is, fundamentally, a denial of human rights and dignity

From this broad conceptualisation, our working definition of poverty is:

> *Poverty is the interplay between material and key non-material deprivations that prevent an individual from participating in society and living with dignity.*

When children live in poverty, they are denied basic rights and opportunities, with often devastating impacts on their lives now and in the future.

Background

The MOR for Children Framework has early origins in the *Children, Communities and Social Capital in Australia*[16] project, undertaken by The Australian National University in partnership with the University of Western Sydney, NAPCAN, and the Benevolent Society, and led by Sharon Bessell (ANU) and Jan Mason (UWS). That research used a range of participatory methods to understand what makes strong and supportive communities for children. Of the six communities in which the *Children, Communities and Social Capital in Australia* research took place, four were categorised as 'disadvantaged' on a range of ABS indictors. The families of many of the children who participated in the research were dealing not only with low income, but with multiple dimensions of poverty.

From that research, we developed the community jigsaw, which identified the pieces children considered important if communities are to be strong and supportive places – for everyone regardless of age. We grouped the pieces identified by children into four broad themes: Relationships; Physical Places; Safety; and Resources.[17]

[16] Funded by the Australian Research Council LP0991064. Final project report available at: https://cpc.weblogs.anu.edu.au/files/2021/10/Children-Communities-and-Social-Capital-Report.pdf
[17] Bessell, S. with Mason, J. (2014). *Putting the Pieces in Place: Children, Communities and Social Capital in Australia*, report from ARC Linkage Project. The Australian National University. Available at: https://cpc.weblogs.anu.edu.au/files/2021/10/Children-Communities-and-Social-Capital-Report.pdf

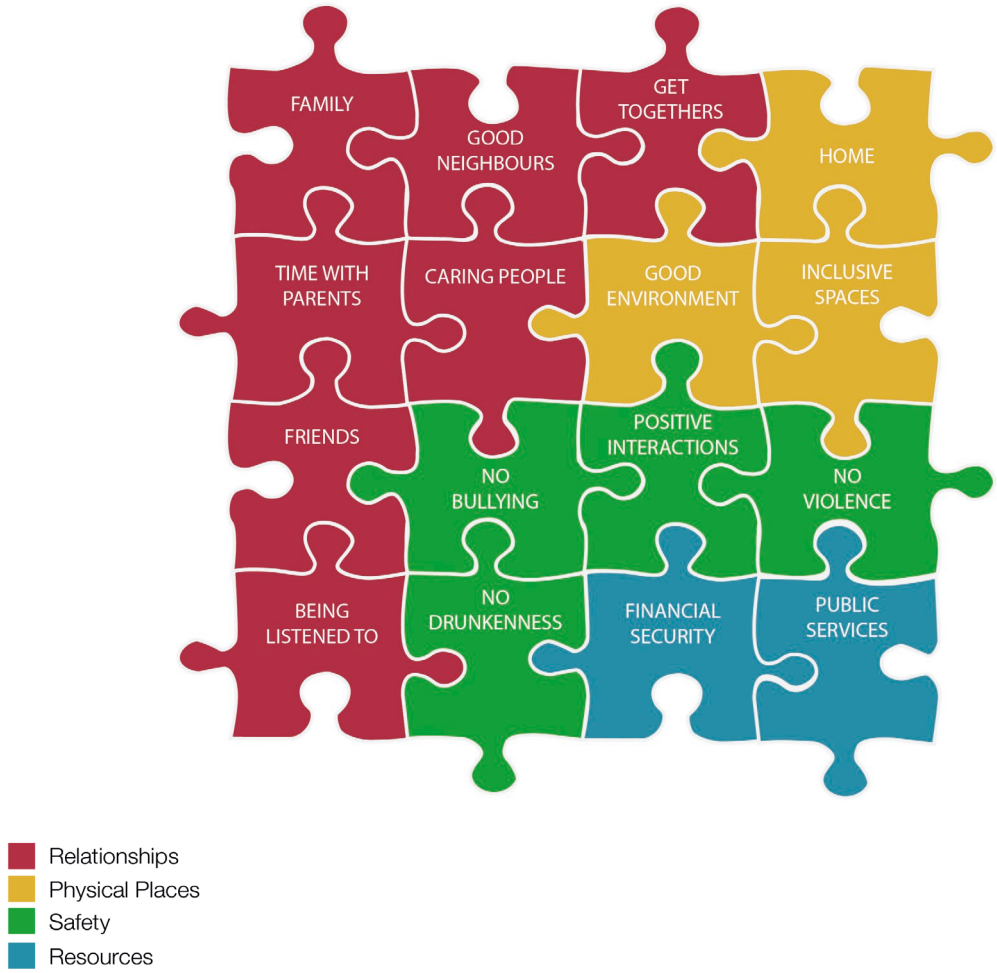

Figure 2: 'Community Jigsaw' developed as part of the Children, Communities and Social Capital research[18]

When all the pieces are in place, children felt that communities are – or would be – supportive and inclusive places to live. As the pieces fall away, children described feeling less secure, and their well-being and connectedness was undermined. The research revealed the ways in which disadvantage and poverty prevent the pieces being in place – or dislodge them. While all themes of the jigsaw were identified by children as important, particular value was placed on relationships. Relationships with parents, siblings, close family, and close friends were of greatest importance to children, but also important were relationships within the broader community. The research highlighted the value of strong and supportive intergenerational relationships to children.[19]

Children who participated in the *Children, Communities and Social Capital in Australia* research also spoke of the ways in which financial hardship impacted on their relationships with parents and the time they were able to spend together.

[18] Bessell, S. with Mason, J. (2014). *Putting the Pieces in Place: Children, Communities and Social Capital in Australia*, report from ARC Linkage Project. The Australian National University. https://cpc.weblogs.anu.edu.au/files/2021/10/Children-Communities-and-Social-Capital-Report.pdf

[19] Bessell, S. (2017). The Role of Intergenerational Relationships in Children's Experiences of Community. *Children and Society, 31*(4), 263-275.

Bessell, S. (2019). Money Matters... But So Do People: Children's views and experiences of living in a "disadvantaged" community. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *97*: 59-66.

Children spoke of the intense pressure their parents were under – of unpaid bills, of precarious work, of parents' exhaustion and stress. It was children's accounts of the emotional toll of poverty and particularly what that meant for time and for relationships that gave rise to the concept of relational deprivation as both an indicator and consequence of poverty.

The issues raised by children in the *Children, Communities and Social Capital in Australia* project are themes that have emerged in other research with children on similar subjects.

Since 2016, the *Understanding and Assessing Childhood Poverty in Indonesia* project has used participatory methods to develop a child-centred understanding of poverty. [20] The socio-economic, political, and cultural context in Indonesia is very different from that of Australia, but strikingly the broad themes that children in Indonesia identified as important were similar to those identified by children in Australia: relationships, physical places, safety, and resources. This research also contributed to the process of conceptualising the MOR Framework presented here.

The Three Dimensions of Child Poverty

The MOR for Children Framework has three dimensions, which have been developed from rights-based, child-centred research across different countries and contexts, analysis of the relevant literature, and assessment of a range of policies and services.

The three dimensions that comprise the MOR Framework are: **M**aterial, **O**pportunity, **R**elational.[21]

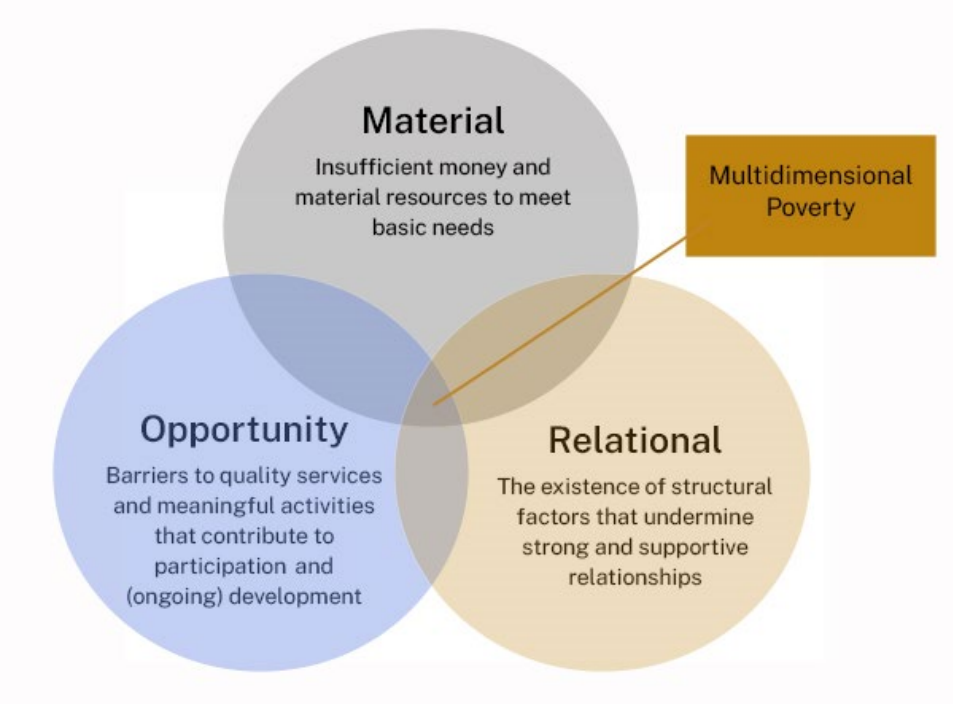

Figure 3: The MOR for Children Framework dimensions

[20] Funded by the Australian Research Council, DP170100657. Bessel, S., C. Siagian, A. Bexley (2020). Towards child-inclusive concepts of childhood poverty: The contribution and potential of research with children. *Children and Youth Services Review 116*(September):105118. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105118

[21] These dimensions, outlined below, are discussed in detail in Bessell, S. (2021). Rethinking Child Poverty. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*.

Deprivation in the material dimension is most closely associated with income poverty. Deprivation in the opportunity or relational dimensions does not necessarily represent poverty, but the interaction of the three dimensions indicates multidimensional poverty - and deep deprivation.

The following section outlines each of these dimensions in more detail.

Material

The material dimension of the MOR Framework captures what Ruth Lister has described as the 'material core' of poverty. [22] Deprivation in this dimension includes a lack of food, shelter, and housing. It also draws attention to the lack of adequate infrastructure - such as transport or shops selling affordable nutritious food - which cannot be addressed by individuals alone, even if their personal or household incomes increase. Parnham has argued that there is an 'increasing spatial, social, economic and political divide between the food enabled and those whose health is suffering from poor food choices.'[23] But Parnham emphasises that choices are not freely made but determined by structural inequalities. The definition of material deprivation adopted by the MOR Framework captures these structural drivers of multidimensional poverty.

Material deprivation also encompasses the absence of essential services, including accessible and high-quality health care and education.

Most research on child poverty has focused on material deprivation, with a series of indicators identified, including regular meals, nutritious food, clothing, footwear, money (available to children), adequate housing, essential utilities (such as electricity, water/plumbing, internet).[24]

In our research, across a number of projects over more than a decade, children have described the ways in which the absence of material basics impacts on their lives. In our research in Australia, children have described housing insecurity as closely related to income poverty - and as creating disadvantage across many aspects of their lives, as well as creating deep stress within their families. Children also described the experience of going hungry when sufficient food is unavailable, and the coping strategies they and their families use. Strikingly, many children who have participated in our research have spoken of the pressure material deprivation places on them and their parents, and the trade-offs that must be made when the essentials of life cannot be met.[25]

The MOR Framework defines **material deprivation** as:

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[22] Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Policy Press.

[23] Parnham, S. (2007). Fat cities and food deserts: exploring a socio-spatial continuum lesson for Australia cities from European experience. *3rd State of Australian Cities National Conference*. Available at https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2007-11/apo-nid60290.pdf

[24] Saunders, P., et al. (2019) Child deprivation in Australia: A child-focused approach. *Australian Journal of Social Issues, Volume54, Issue1*: 4-21;

Gordon, D., et al. (2003) *Child Poverty in the Developing World*, Policy Press;

Main, G., & Bradshaw, J. (2016). Child poverty in the UK: Measures, prevalence and intra-household sharing. *Critical Social Policy, 36*(1): 38- 61.

[25] Bessell, S. 2021. Rethinking Child Poverty, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*.

Insufficient money and material resources to meet basic needs.

Opportunity

The second dimension of the MOR Framework is 'opportunity deprivation'. This dimension draws on children's accounts of the constraints on their activities and choices that result from poverty. Children spoke not only of the ways in which lack of money limits opportunities, but of the consequences of poor-quality services, a lack of social networks, shame, and stigma. Opportunity deprivation often has the damaging impact of undermining children's sense of self and their hopes and dreams.

Opportunity deprivation draws on thinking around both human rights and child development to uncover how children are negatively impacted by poverty both now and in the future. The absence of opportunities prevents children from living - and often even aspiring to live - lives they have reason to value. Opportunity deprivation undermines all human rights guaranteed to children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, but has especially deleterious impacts on the participation rights, which are essential to children being able to express their views, engage in decision making, and exercise agency.

The MOR Framework defines **opportunity deprivation** as :

Barriers to quality services and meaningful activities that contribute to participation and (ongoing) development.

Relational

The third dimension of the MOR Framework - relational deprivation - is the most novel. It is also of deep importance to children.

In our research, children spoke of the importance of relationships. Relationships with family and same-age friends are central to children's lives and were emphasised by children living in very different contexts as being of utmost importance. What is sometimes less recognised, but was emphasised by children in our research, is the importance of intergenerational relationships as well as same-age relationships. Children also spoke of the value of strong and supportive relationships beyond their immediate family and friendship groups. It was these relationships that gave children a sense of inclusion, support, and care within their communities.

The value of relationships to children's lives has been recognised in several well-being frameworks.[26] Less recognised is the ways in which relationships are undermined in contexts of

[26] OECD (2021). Measuring what matters for child well-being and policies. *Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability, and Equality Opportunity Policy Brief*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/wise/Measuring-What-Matters-for-Child-Wellbeing-and-Policies-Policy-brief-July-2021.pdf;

poverty. The accounts of children who have participated in our research over many years have highlighted the ways in which poverty places pressure on relationships - both close, personal relationships and broader social relationships.

Our research over time has reinforced the importance of relationships in the context of poverty – and particularly the need to clearly identify the ways structural factors, systems and policies reinforce – rather than mitigate – relational deprivation. And the flip side is also important – strong supportive relationships can act as a buffer to shield children from the impacts of poverty. But of course, parents struggle to maintain those strong relationships when under intense pressure themselves.

The relationships dimension of the MOR Framework does not focus on the nature of children's interpersonal and social relationships per se, but seeks to illuminate the structural factors that impact negatively on relationships. Thus, this dimension aims to focus attention on structural factors and systemic failures that damage the web of relationships that is essential for children to thrive.

The MOR Framework defines **relationship deprivation** as:

> **The existence of structural factors that undermine strong and supportive relationships.**

A Strengths-Based and Rights-Based Approach

While the MOR Framework is designed to uncover the nature of multidimensional poverty, as a basis for action, the opportunity and relational dimensions also have the potential to illuminate the strengths and protective factors that already exist in children's lives. The Framework is able to highlight both the kinds of opportunities and relationships that are meaningful and important to children, and those that they currently have already in place.

The Framework uses the language of poverty and deprivation as part of a conscious political strategy, which recognises that if a problem is not named, it cannot be addressed. However, it is also consciously strengths- and rights-based in its approach - seeking to focus attention on structural causes and systems failures, while rejecting a narrative of blaming individuals. In doing so, it aims to highlight not only the gaps that must be addressed but also the protective factors and strengths of families and communities that must be recognised, valued, and supported.

A Child-Centred Approach

The MOR Framework is a child-centred approach to conceptualising, assessing, and addressing child poverty, resulting from research with children, using a rights-based methodology and participatory methods.

The development of the MOR Framework is based on research that has sought to understand children's perspectives, priorities and experience - and to co-construct knowledge of growing

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Fattore, T., Mason, J. & Watson, E. (2008). When children are asked about their well-being: Towards a framework for guiding policy. *Child Indicators Research, 2*, 57-77;

Bradshaw, J., Hoelscher, P. & Richardson, D. (2007). An Index of child well-being In the European Union. *Social Indictors Research, 80*, 133-177.

up in contexts of disadvantage. It has also benefitted from research with similar objectives. In taking a child-centred approach to the research that underpins the Framework, we sought to develop a child standpoint. Standpoint theory 'begins with the idea that the less powerful members of society experience a different reality as a consequence of their oppression.' Moreover, standpoint theory places an obligation on researchers to recognise, respect, and acknowledge children as 'the sources of authoritative knowledge about their own world and as active agents in shaping and interpreting that world, constructing meaning and purpose much as adults do.' Children are generally positioned as less powerful than adults in social hierarchies, while children living in poverty are generally less powerful than both adults and children who do not experience poverty. Thus, a child standpoint - developed on the ways in which children who live in poverty experience the world - is powerful in progressing children's human rights and social justice. It also contributes to a genuinely child-centred approach.

How the Framework can be Applied

The MOR Framework has the potential to contribute to a greater understanding of child poverty, and to addressing the underlying causes.

The MOR Framework has the potential to be applied in four ways:

- To understand child poverty.
- To measure child poverty.
- To inform policies, programs and services.
- To assess policies, programs and services.

Understanding child poverty

The MOR Framework provides a means of understanding more deeply the multidimensional nature of child poverty. It provides a structure through which to illuminate the complexities of multidimensional poverty and the impacts on children's lives. The underlying principles on which the MOR Framework is based necessitate that such understanding must be centred on the meaningful participation of children.

Measuring child poverty

The MOR Framework has the potential to be expanded into a quantitative measure of multidimensional child poverty, with indicators associated with each dimension used to assess the proportion of children experiencing poverty. The power of such a measure is not simply in assessing the extent of child poverty *within* each dimension, but to uncover where dimensions *interact* and *intersect* to create deep multidimensional poverty.

Informing policies, programs and services

The MOR Framework has a crucial role to play in providing a child-centred tool for designing and implementing policies, programs and services to address multidimensional child poverty. It can also provide an additional and much-needed role in informing policies, programs and services that are not directly focused on addressing poverty for their likely impact on multidimensional child poverty. Here the Framework has a potentially ground-breaking role to play in preventing perverse, unintended consequences - by uncovering the potential for those consequences to occur.

Assessing policies programs and services

Just as the MOR Framework has a role to play in the design and implementation of policies, programs and services, so to can it be used as a tool to assess the impacts of specific policies and programs on multidimensional child poverty.

Next Steps

Throughout 2021, the Children's Policy Centre undertook a program of engagement with representatives of not-for-profit service providers, community organisations, government agencies, and Commissioners for children and young people to test the thinking behind the MOR Framework and to gain feedback on its potential value.[27] That process indicated strong interest in the Framework and recognition of its value and potential. The strongest interest was in the potential of the framework to support the design, implementation and assessment of policies and programs to ensure child poverty is not exacerbated and to move towards genuinely child-inclusive approaches across all policy areas.

The engagement process also highlighted the need for the MOR Framework to be inclusive and respectful of the experiences and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Immediate and medium-term next steps will involve:

- Research with children and their families to further develop each dimension of the Framework and identify measurable indicators for each.
- Development of the Framework as a child-centred tool for designing and assessing policies, programs and services that are genuinely child-inclusive.
- Engagement with First Nations elders and communities to better understand how culture and country might be incorporated Into the Framework, and if and how the Framework reflects the priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- A better understanding of the extent to which the MOR Framework addresses the priorities of specific groups of children, including children with disability, young carers, and children with experiences of out-of-home care.

As the MOR for Children Framework is further strengthened by research with children, families and communities and by engagement with peak organisations, it will provide an evidence base for mitigating child poverty in ways that will genuinely benefit children.

[27] The report of the engagement process is available at: https://cpc.weblogs.anu.edu.au/projects/