Specific actions against child poverty are most welcome. However, they should be framed within a broader context that looks beyond poverty and beyond age-determined groups. From a sociological point of view, poverty is a social relationship that cannot be de-linked from the societal context in which it originates and exists. The new focus of international organisations on universal social protection instead of on ‘poverty reduction’ may help to achieve this. Working exclusively at the level of child poverty entails a serious risk of ignoring or neglecting its broader causes and consequences. Reducing child poverty cannot be a solution when poverty in general and impoverishment processes continue to exist.

According to UNICEF, the United Nations (UN) Children’s Fund, 1.4 million young people between 10 and 19 years old die every year because of accidents, suicides, criminality and aids. Around 50,000 young women under 19 die during pregnancy or while giving birth. One fourth of girls between 15 and 19 in developing countries are married. For young children under 10, the main causes of death in developing countries are diarrhea and measles. A quarter of young children are not getting enough nutrients to grow properly. Three hundred of them die every hour because of malnutrition. In many families children have to skip school to help their parents at work. Over the past five years, the price of food has soared across the globe, due to extreme weather conditions, diverting farmland to grow bio-fuels, speculative trading of food commodities and the global financial crisis (UNICEF, 2012; FAO, 2013).

This list is endless. We can complete it with the number of children at work – more than 200 million – children in forced labour – more than one million – and high percentages of youth unemployment – up to or more than 55 percent in rich countries like Greece and Spain, or even more than 50 percent in some municipalities of the rich region of Brussels (ILO, 2012a; European Commission, 2013; Irisnet, 2013).

At the June 2012 UN Conference Rio+20 on sustainable development, the focus was on solidarity with future generations, and rightly so. But it is clear there should be no hope for this as long as we do not succeed in organising intra-generational solidarity and care for the generations that are with us already, the world’s children.

While the Bretton Woods institutions – World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) – continue to stress the importance of poverty reduction and the progress that has been
reached in reducing extreme poverty, UN organisations have realised this cannot be the only answer. It is impossible to fight poverty while leaving the poverty-creating economic policies unchanged and without tackling inequality. Several UN services and organisations are now promoting a transformative universal social protection. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has adopted at its 2012 International Labour Conference a recommendation on ‘Social Protection Floors’ (UNRISD, 2010; United Nations, 2010a, 2010b; CEPAL, 2011; ILO, 2012b).

In an immensely rich world with all the possibilities and resources to solve social problems, the current social situation cannot be justified. It shows the urgency of adopting new policies and questioning some of the most ‘obvious’ ideas about poverty in general and child poverty in particular. In this contribution, I want to adopt a critical approach, challenging some of the most ‘obvious’ ideas and questioning some of the practices that characterise work on child poverty. In this way, space can be created for alternative ideas and for a more holistic approach to poverty and wealth.

While children’s rights are extremely important in trying to solve some of the most urgent problems children are faced with, the solutions will not sustainably help if they are not linked to the broader context of human rights. Moreover, this legal approach will have to be completed with a sociological perspective in order to take into account the societal context in which children are living.

1. Poverty and globalisation

I want to argue that globalisation is the best remedy to fight poverty. But in order to avoid all misunderstandings, let me add immediately that it is a totally different kind of globalisation I want to promote and that child poverty will not be tackled as a separate problem from poverty in general and more particularly from inequality. I am not an anti-globalist, but an alter-globalist and a Kantian internationalist. This means I do consider the world to be a ‘global village’ in which nation-states only have a limited relevance, and that international cooperation based on respect and the awareness of our interdependence are crucial.

The globalisation we have known in the past decades was focused on the economy, global trade and deregulated finances. While global trade can indeed be useful to develop economies, it can never do so without taking into account the power relations. ‘Kicking away the ladder’ when you arrived at the top and shouting to those waiting on the ground that they only have to come up and join you, is not the best and most honest way to promote global economic development (Chang, 2002). Deregulating finance in such a way that profit maximising with citizen’s bank deposits becomes the only objective, while banks can blackmail governments, is the most direct way to crisis and collective impoverishment of populations. This neoliberal globalisation has reached its limits and should urgently be put to an end (Crouch, 2011).

The same goes for political globalisation. The global institutions that were set up after the Second World War have reached their limits. In spite of changing economic relations, ‘emerging’ countries like India, Brazil, South Africa or Nigeria have no real say in world affairs as they are decided on in the UN Security Council. China and Russia are members of the UN highest body, but have insufficient votes to weigh on decisions in the World Bank or the IMF. Dominant countries from Europe and America are declining, but do keep the power to decide on war and peace, on development or social regression. The time has come to re-balance power relations and to respect the right to self-determination as well as to re-examine the sovereignty
of nations and peoples. Current multilateralism is in crisis and the newly created G20 does not make any real difference (Wahl, 2012).

It has become clear by now what neoliberalism means. It is a political programme more than an economic programme. It aims at promoting markets and corporations and basically wants to shape a new kind of state in favour of protecting global markets, competitiveness, property rights and consumer welfare. It is not concerned anymore with domestic markets, social integration or equality and that is why it promotes poverty reduction and breaks away from social protection – economic and social rights. An analysis of the poverty discourse of the World Bank of the 1990s shows that its focus on poverty was not meant to improve or complete existing social security, but on the contrary to replace it with poverty reduction policies. These policies then are not the ‘human face of globalisation’ but its masterpiece for dismantling welfare states (Mestrum, 2002). Current developments in the European Union confirm these findings (Mestrum, 2014).

Putting an end to neoliberal globalisation and to Washington Consensus policies does not mean falling back on autarchy and closed borders. On the contrary, it means an honest negotiation on how we can keep humankind alive in a world with the threats of climate change, on how we can share responsibilities and resources, on how we can organise global solidarity.

I want to argue that globalisation and development should be synonymous, by which I mean that development, in the North and South, should be re-thought in order to take into account climate change, the needs of poor populations, and (also in the North and South), the levelling out of industrial and agricultural productive capacities. In the same way, taking into account the worldwide protest movements of these past years, solidarity should be looked at again, in order to give people the protection they need and deserve, wherever they live and in whatever political regime they live. An alternative globalisation should mean the eradication of poverty and of impoverishment processes, as well as the drastic reduction of inequalities. Together with a shift in power relations, this should lead to comparable development levels in all countries while maintaining people’s sovereignty. In other words, it means global and shared responsibilities for managing the Earth and its peoples, articulated to regional, national and local responsibilities for practically organising states, economies and societies.

This is a Kantian, idealistic vision because the realistic vision based on interests will, in a world with scarcer basic resources like water and food, necessarily lead to more and harsher conflicts between states and people competing for them. It is not a matter of ‘common interests’ – the interests of rich and poor countries, of rich and poor classes are different – but of ‘balanced interests’ – the result of negotiations on whose interests can be promoted and to what extent. What we need, then, is an enlightened vision on what is possible and necessary to respect everyone’s human rights, supposing these rights are universally accepted. Such a vision will not be achieved overnight and may always remain a faraway dream. But in order to start and work at the necessary reforms and changes, we need a utopia; we need to know what we work for and what the objective can be. Promoting children’s rights requires this fundamental

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1 UNCTAD LDC-reports have been pleading for a long time for more policy autonomy for poor countries.

2 ‘Washington Consensus’ is the name used for the neoliberal policies and reforms introduced after the external debt crisis of the 1980s (see Williamson, 1990). The main thrust of these policies has been maintained throughout the following decades and are now applied in Europe.
change, since these rights cannot be de-linked from human rights in general and human rights cannot be de-linked from the political and societal context in which they exist.

This is the background against which I propose to look at children’s poverty today. In the following section, I want to take a brief look at global poverty reduction policies and their results. In section three I look at the semantic confusion around ‘poverty’ and the difficulties this entails for the measurement of child poverty and for specific policies for children. Section four looks at the ideology of poverty, which means that more often than not poverty reduction policies are not meant to help poor people in the first place. We have to search for other reasons to explain the current focus on child poverty. In the conclusion I repeat that child poverty cannot be de-linked from poverty in general and from its societal context. While academic research may need to single out specific issues, their policy implications should include the broader context in which they are present.

2. Poverty reduction policies

The international community has now two parallel strategies to fight poverty. The first one is the ‘Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper’ (PRSP) process, introduced by the IMF and World Bank in 1999. It requires poor countries to present to the institutions a poverty strategy, defined through participation with major stakeholders. The ‘ownership’ principle on which it is based is limited, however, by the fact that the strategy has to be accepted by the Joint Staff of the institutions. Analysis of the process shows that most proposals concern in the first place institutional and macro-economic reforms. The poverty dimension itself is seriously limited by a lack of resources, imposed caps on expenditures, and reliable and comparable data in most countries.

The second one is the ‘Millennium Development Goals’ (MDG) process adopted by the UN Millennium Summit in 2000. Its main objective is to reduce extreme poverty by half by 2015, compared to 1990. It is clear that this objective will be met at the global level, thanks to serious poverty reduction in India and China. Nevertheless, other countries in which MDG policies were proclaimed, such as those of Sub-Saharan Africa, seriously lag behind. While the lack of sufficient development aid by rich countries certainly has to be blamed, it also has to be stressed that the goals, however important they are, are not linked to any coherent economic or social development strategy or to a strategy for respecting human rights (UNDP, 2010; UNCTAD, 2010).

It also has to be stressed that the two poverty reduction processes are implemented in parallel. It took almost ten years before the first references to the MDG process were to be found in some PRSPs.

Both processes are subject to severe criticism (Pogge; Mestrum and Özden). Knowing that extreme poverty is poverty that kills people, the main point I want to stress here is the unbelievable ‘lightness’ with which rich countries are buying themselves a ‘good conscience’ with a promise of halving extreme poverty over a period of 25 years. Faced with the failure of seriously reducing extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa, the World Bank President, now repeats an old promise. Whereas President McNamara promised in 1973 to eradicate extreme poverty by the year 2000, President Kim now suggests it might be eradicated by 2030 (Mestrum, 2013), with exactly the same arguments as forty years ago.

Apart from the numerous NGOs that have published critical reports on the PRSP process, three ‘official’ reports from UN institutions can be mentioned: UNCTAD (2002); IMF (2007); UNRISD (2010).
3. Tackling child poverty and semantic confusion

How can one look at child poverty in this context? How can we tackle it? The first major document we have to look at is the Convention for the Rights of the Child (CRC), based on a concept of children as social subjects with their own rights. If we consider these rights as fundamental claims for the realisation of social justice and human dignity, they certainly are the most direct way to solving children’s poverty. The second approach is the one now proposed by all major international development organisations, that is, a system of universal social protection, with a particular focus on children. Children do need special attention, since they are more vulnerable than adults.

However, one of the problems with a specific focus on child poverty is the definition of poverty. While statistics are necessarily made up in terms of income and consumption poverty,
a global consensus exists on the ‘multidimensional’ nature of poverty. It means that the income
deficit is not the only or main characteristic of poor people, but that other problems, such as a
lack of education and training, of health care, of decent housing, of ‘empowerment’, of ‘voice’
and in general a greater vulnerability are to be taken into account.

Especially for children this seems to be very important, since it is obvious that no one will
expect children to earn a living or to achieve a decent standard of living for themselves. The
question then arises what specific dimensions should be taken into account for children?
Education? Housing? Health care? And the question that arises spontaneously when examin-
ing these points is to what extent these dimensions are different from adult’s poverty. Or in
what way are these dimensions different from the needs of non-poor children?

These questions are all directly related to the semantic confusion around ‘poverty’. Speaking
of ‘multidimensional poverty’ is less obvious than it seems at first sight. The different ‘dimen-
sions’ linked to poverty can be causes as well as consequences of income poverty, and according
to the dimensions that are emphasised, the research and/or policy practice will be directed
towards specific groups in society: female heads of household, the elderly, the disabled, child-
ren, migrants and asylum seekers, etc. The existence of different NGOs each concerned with
one specific group of people also testifies to this fragmentation in social protection and poverty
reduction.

The problem with poverty research as well as with policy practice is the difficulty in de-
linking them from the normative approach to poverty. All definitions point to some ‘deficit’
and are influenced by what one thinks is economically sustainable, socially desirable or psycho-
logically feasible. There is a lack of ‘objective’ poverty definitions, since the perceived ‘deficit’
can only be defined in relation to an arbitrary ‘enough’ (Novak, 1996; Mestrum, 2002; Chapter
1 in this Handbook, p. 2).

I want to argue then that while poverty reduction or eradication policies will necessarily
have to be multidimensional, poverty is, in every market economy, an income deficit. Working
on aspects like education, health, housing, etc. will need to aim at giving people an adequate
income, be it in terms of allowances – in cash or in kind – or in terms of wages. Integrating
the causes and consequences of poverty into its definition directly leads to an enormous seman-
tic confusion that also exempts people from analysing the root causes of poverty and from
looking at its direct consequences for different groups of people. Training people if there are
no jobs or if people have to remain ‘working poor’ is rather useless. Empowering people in a
disempowering political context can only lead to frustration.

Defining poverty in terms of income is also the only way to stay in line with the human
rights of poor people. International human rights instruments clearly recognise the right to ‘an
adequate standard of living’ (article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and
Cultural Rights; art. 27 CRC). In any market economy, this is impossible without an income.
This is why the ILO in its recommendation for Social Protection Floors mentions ‘basic
income security for children’, as well as for older persons and people not active on the labour
market (ILO, 2012c: point 5B).

What does this all mean for children? I want to make a distinction between specific measures
of child poverty and specific policies for them. Statistical instruments are always the first
need when one plans to develop policies for a specific group of people. Even if it is far from
sure that statistics on poverty can help to solve the poverty problem, for all those who want to
take specific measures in favour of children, a better idea on how many children are poor and
where to find these poor children is an important first step.

Income poverty clearly is not relevant to measure child poverty. But what about the meas-
urement of multidimensional poverty? It is certainly possible to measure different types of
deprivation, in terms of education, health care, housing, etc. Here, two problems arise. The first one is, to what extent do these dimensions differ from adult’s poverty? Unless we assume that parents consciously discriminate against their children or unless we want to help children without helping their parents – which would be morally difficult to defend – the objective advantages of knowing how many children suffer from specific deprivations that also affect their families remain unclear. Certainly, making visible the problems of poor children may raise the awareness and point to the urgency of eradicating poverty. It also may help to break the ‘vicious circle’ of poverty, since children who live in poverty will carry this psychological and material burden for the rest of their lives.

The second problem is the always very difficult issue of defining the cut-off point for multi-dimensional measurements. How much health care and how many years of schooling are necessary for being considered non-poor? What number will trigger the ‘help’ that poor children are entitled to? This question is impossible to solve in an objective way and always implies arbitrary decisions.

Allow me to give an example: the UNICEF Innocenti Research Paper, *Measuring Child Poverty* (UNICEF, 2012) measures child deprivation based on 14 indicators, and children are identified as ‘poor’ if they lack 2 or more of these items. This gives for The Netherlands a child poverty percentage of 2.7, for Germany 8.8, for France 10.1, for the UK 5.5 and for Romania 72.6. However, if we look at relative income poverty – that is families with less than 50% of median income in their countries – The Netherlands scores 6.1 percent, Germany a comparable 8.5 percent, France 8.8 percent, the UK 12.1 percent and Romania 25.5 percent. These numbers are difficult to interpret and do not allow for general conclusions. Furthermore, the results may be very different if you start to count from 3 instead of 2 indicators, an arbitrary choice. And the third comment is that all these indicators, meals per day, fresh fruit, internet access, books and leisure are as applicable to adults as they are to children.

More generally, I wonder to what extent statistics help us to better organise poverty reduction. Certainly, in countries where poverty is a ‘residual’ problem because of generalised wealth and good systems of social protection, it can be useful to go and look for specific remaining problems in order to solve them. But when more than half of the population of a country is ‘poor’, does it help to know exactly what the number of poor or of poor children is? Is it not some economic and social development for the whole population these countries need in the first place?

As for specific policies for poor children, do we need a separate approach for children at all? Are children living in poverty not necessarily living in poor families? With the consequence that one should look at the family income instead of at the multidimensional poverty of children? Can one imagine non-income-poor families with poor children? Or income-poor families with non-poor children? In order to answer these questions, I propose to look at some of the arguments in favour of a separate poverty approach for children.

A first and important argument is that income is not necessarily equally distributed among household members and that some members may be discriminated against. This is certainly true and has been pointed out by feminist researchers who would like to know more objectively whether there is a so-called feminisation of poverty. Women and girls certainly are discriminated against in many areas and we have statistics about their disadvantages in terms of health, education and wages.4 But that is no reason to say they are more

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4 This is why UNDP proposed in its Human Development Report of 1995 a ‘Gender-related Development Index’ (GDI) and a ‘Gender Empowerment Measure’ (GEM). In its Human Development Report of 2013 it proposes a ‘Gender Inequality Index’ (p. 156).
‘poor’ in terms of income. We simply don’t know; there are almost no disaggregated income
poverty statistics.

It will be clear however, that gender discrimination is not directly linked to ‘poverty’ but is
a matter of cultural traditions and attitudes that will not change with anti-poverty policies. Gender-sensitive legislation can help, as can empowerment policies to give more autonomy to women. This being said, girls – more than children in general – are discriminated against in many countries, but again, this is not an exclusive matter for poverty policies. Poverty is, however, a gendered problem, different for men and women. If one truly wants to reduce poverty, one will have to work differently at the level of mothers and daughters than at the level of men and boys, because yes, there are poor mothers and poor girls in non-income-poor households (Chant, 2007).

A second argument in favour of a child poverty approach concerns the specific poverty dimensions of children, such as immunisation and child labour. For immunisation it will be clear that all children should receive it, this is not a specific need of poor children, so it can be useful in a general immunisation policy to pay particular attention to poor children, but this is not limited to poverty problems. On the contrary, it clearly shows the need for universal policies instead of a targeted approach with the always existing risk of stigmatisation and informational distortion.

Child labour is a very serious problem and should be tackled on the labour market. Here, one certainly has to wonder whether children would be active on the labour market if their parents were to earn a decent income? Child labour is less a problem of poor children than a problem of children in poor families. If parents get an allowance or a job with a decent income, chances are high they will send their children to school, possibly leave them at home to take care of younger children. Child labour very often is a coping mechanism in case of extreme poverty, and it diminishes when parents have other opportunities (Del Carpio and Loayza, 2012).

Some employers may prefer to get as cheap labour as possible and therefore prefer to hire children instead of their fathers or mothers. Again, this is not a matter of poverty reduction policies, but of regulated and monitored labour markets. Because families may escape poverty thanks to the additional income of their children’s labour, whether it is income or multidimensional poverty. If looked at exclusively from a poverty perspective, not being registered as being poor, these families and these children will not be taken care of.

At any rate, child labour is a very difficult topic and research has shown that its abolition is not necessarily the best solution (see Hanson, Volonakis and Al-Rozzi, Chapter 18 of this Handbook). Working conditions clearly have to improve and child exploitation in factories or in families with domestic work obviously has to be condemned (ILO, 2013). But the so-called ‘wealth paradox’, which shows that child labour is higher when parents have productive assets, such as land, also shows that children can develop their skills by helping their parents. The main problem is then to have sufficient time and resources left for school and leisure (Del Carpio and Loayza, 2012; Lieten, 2005).

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6 A decline in child labour and more household expenditures on education have been noticed in families receiving a Conditional Cash Transfer, such as Brazil: World Bank (2009); Hanlon et al. (2010).
All other dimensions of a multidimensional poverty approach for children are not different from those for adults: food, shelter, clothes, health, water and sanitation. They can all be tackled in a poverty reduction policy at the level of households since it is difficult to see a difference between adults and children in terms of access to them. Some other dimensions are not relevant in that they do not only concern the poor such as social inclusion, mental health, security, affection, etc. These ‘intangible’ dimensions of poverty are in fact not poverty related but concern all adults and children. ‘Affection poverty’ certainly is not absent from wealthy families since these have no monopoly on love and care.

Finally, the argument of the special vulnerability of children to environmental degradation, such as lack of drinking water, bad air from in-house cooking, etc. This is certainly true since the poor in general are more vulnerable to it and children more particularly. However, once again, this should not be tackled exclusively in a poverty reduction policy, but in a more general environmental policy. It would be rather meaningless to just solve the child-specific problems, and not the other ones.

Does this help to answer the questions we put? Is it possible to have poor children in non-poor households? I think not, except for girls that may be discriminated against, but if that is the case, their mothers will be suffering gender discrimination as well. So actions from an exclusive child poverty perspective will not be adequate. Is it possible to have non-poor children in poor households? Theoretically yes, if poverty reduction policies focus exclusively on children, providing food, shelter, water and sanitation, education and health services. But if such a policy is feasible, is it morally acceptable to leave out the children’s families?

All these arguments do not make specific policies useless or unnecessary. Specific actions against child labour, in favour of immunisation and in favour of good education may be most welcome. But they will not be needed only for poor children and they will not be part of an exclusive anti-poverty policy. Rather, they are an additional argument for universal policies, avoiding the pitfalls of targeting (Grosh, 1994; Sen, 1995). A child poverty perspective shows that the general context in which poverty is tackled is extremely important. Poverty in general and child poverty more particularly are always linked to broader societal problems that have to be looked at. Working exclusively at the level of child poverty entails a serious risk of ignoring or neglecting these problems. Possibly, one may reduce child poverty, but not poverty in general, let alone labour market competition and inequality, to name just a few.

4. The ideology of poverty

If my reasoning is correct, then one might wonder why so much attention today is given to child poverty. It is true that children are often not taken into account in general poverty reduction policies. This points to the weakest spot of all poverty reduction policies: they are mostly not meant to reduce poverty in the first place, but arrived on the national and international political agenda because of other reasons than the actual existing poverty. These reasons are still predominant today.

According to Georg Simmel, the father of the sociology of poverty, ‘poverty’ is a teleological problem that never is in line with the needs of the poor but always with the needs of society or of the dominant classes. The ‘exclusion’ of the poor is due to the refusal to consider them the ultimate goal of poverty policies. ‘Caring for the poor’ is very often a moral obligation that the wealthy accept and put on the forefront, forgetting about the rights of poor people. If assistance to the poor was given in the first place, as a right, there would be no limit to the transfer of wealth, and it would rapidly lead to the total eradication of poverty. But that, clearly, does not happen, nor is it the objective, though everyone will agree there is more than enough
wealth on this planet (Simmel, 1988). This also refers back to the neoliberal philosophy as mentioned before. States do not have to protect economic and social rights anymore, but only civil and political rights, such as the right to life. They do have to see to it that people do not die from hunger, but not that they have jobs and decent wages. This becomes a responsibility of the poor themselves.

This point also opens the difficult discussion on whether poverty is a human rights violation or not. From a strictly legal point of view, article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – the right to life – only applies to the death penalty, torture or ill-treatment by States. In a more extended political perspective, one might also consider State policies preventing people from producing or acquiring food, shelter and health care as life-threatening practices. In that light, fighting extreme poverty can be seen as defending the civil right to life. In preparing the Guiding Principles on human rights and extreme poverty at the UN Human Rights Council, the rapporteurs have been struggling with the different concepts. Whereas the Vienna Conference on Human Rights of 1993 defined extreme poverty as a ‘violation of human dignity’, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights speaks in her final draft on poverty as ‘a cause and a consequence of human rights violations’, economic and social rights as well as civil and political rights.7

It is this general context and the confusion around the meaning of ‘poverty’ that can explain the search for ever poorer and more vulnerable people. The UN and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) first put the focus on women, the ‘poorest of the poor’, the ‘human face of poverty’… (for a long series of statements of this kind, see Mestrum, 2002: 159). It explains the focus on extreme poverty instead of on poverty… It explains the focus on ‘chronic poverty’ instead of current poverty. And it explains, I am afraid, the current focus on children. As Gilbert Rist would explain: women and children are the ones that have to be saved first when the ship is sinking … (Rist, 1996)

Another reason that is now used in the context of child poverty is also used for promoting some types of social protection in general, namely ‘social investment’. It is a costly mistake for societies to allow child poverty, says UNICEF (2012). It leads to reduced skills and productivity, lower levels of health and educational achievement, increased likelihood of unemployment and welfare dependence, higher cost of juridical and social protection and a loss of social cohesion. This is a purely economic argument, as can also be found in many documents around the newly promoted ‘social protection floor’. There is no reason of course to refute these arguments if they can help to defend social protection and mobilise resources for it, but one should wonder what happens if the ‘return on investment’ is not to happen or is not the expected one? Why should one invest in pensions, if old people are not productive anymore? And why should one invest in child care if the labour market is already more than saturated? Should children be entitled to an education for which there is no demand on the labour market?

The focus on child poverty also corresponds to another characteristic of neoliberalism, which is its exclusive attention on individuals. Children are not seen as members of a family or of a community, the level at which poverty should be tackled, but as individuals. This may be in line with the CRC, though individual human rights do not cancel the collective rights of

communities and societies, on the contrary, these are complementary (Flahault, 2011). Individual human rights are extremely important, but poverty can only be eradicated if seen as a social relationship, and this needs collective social and economic rights as well as a certain measure of redistribution in order to tackle inequality. Without the huge inequality that there is in our immensely rich world, there would be no poverty. Also, at the level of families, if men are jobless and poor, very probably their wives will be poor and their children will be poor. There is no possibility of separating them. The best way to save children from poverty may be to give a pension to aged people (Hanlon et al., 2010). As it may be useful to save children from poverty by better regulating global food prices or stop the global land-grabbing practices that rob farmers of their livelihood. In short, poverty in general and child poverty more particularly will only be eradicated with other development policies that do not rob poor countries and peoples of their livelihoods (Chang, 2002).

All this is also evidence of the lowered level of ambition of donor countries and of governments in developing countries. While ‘development cooperation’ started in the 1960s with ‘economic development’ and was later coupled to ‘social development’, now both have been abandoned and poverty eradication became poverty reduction and in fact the reduction – halving – of extreme poverty. But without economic and social development, without rules to govern world trade and to stop the exploitation of poor countries and people, impoverishment processes continue and worsen (Chang, 2002).

This leads to two other reflections. Focusing on women and child poverty has a major advantage. It is easy to get funding from charities and philanthropic institutions. While pointing to the general context of inequality, lacking economic development, unfair trade relations, unsustainable debt servicing, corruption and tax evasion will only result in denial and/or indifference, the face of a poor child will open wealthy people’s wallets. Poverty reduction, especially when it is focused on women and children, allows for unfair economic and social structures to be maintained and even strengthened. It even gives these structures a moral legitimacy while leaving room for compensatory action by the wealthy.

Focusing on women and children also has the advantage of looking for ‘innocent’ victims. Children more particularly cannot help being born poor; they bear no responsibility at all, so they should be helped. The same does not apply to poor jobless men, who certainly have rejected good opportunities to work or did not develop the right attitudes to work. Implicitly, this points to a deep-rooted cultural view on poverty: innocent poor children should not remain in the culturally deprived surroundings of poor families, who are too poor to avoid the poverty trap and to seize the opportunities that are offered to them. This is what explains the calls for preschool enrolments and the many attempts to separate poor children from their families.

5. Conclusion

Alternatives will have to be looked for that will allow children, and all other people, all over the world, to live a life in dignity. While specific attention for poor children certainly is necessary, the usefulness of specific measurements of child poverty can be questioned. Children’s rights as well as the rights of their families, should always be put in the forefront without losing sight of society’s background.

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8 This conservative point of view is defended by authors like Dalrymple (2010) and also links up with the ancient distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘non deserving’ poor.
A first condition seems to me not to de-link child poverty from other people’s poverty and from society as a whole. Even if, theoretically, child poverty can be dissociated from the poverty of their families and their communities, it goes without saying that for poverty reduction policies to be perceived as being fair, all poor people should benefit from them and be allowed social progress, which is not possible without involving society’s non-poor.

Second, this means that labour market policies and social protection will come at the forefront. A very positive development in recent years can been seen in the work of the ILO and the UN who now plead for ‘decent work’, a ‘social protection floor’ and ‘universal social protection’. More research should be done into the transformative potential of social protection policies in the fields of the economy, social relationships, democracy and the environment. If parallel processes in these different fields can be put into place, a positive interaction between them might enhance the needed systemic changes.

Third, all research points to the fact that poverty reduction strongly needs women and gender-sensitive policies. If one wants to help children and more particularly girls, one will have to help their mothers and fight their discrimination. A gender agenda goes far beyond poverty, but it is the major element that can help to promote social change, empowering women, giving them economic autonomy, education and health services.

Fourth, it should be clear that poverty cannot be de-linked from economic and social development. Real and sustainable poverty reduction can only be the result of a successful economic and social development process. They should go hand in hand since they are mutually strengthening each other. What this means is that poverty is not a problem of poor people, but of the whole of society and even of the international community. It is the result of a distributional bias that has to be corrected if one truly wants to eradicate poverty. Poverty can never be solved if one does not stop the impoverishment processes that are inherent to the current neoliberal policies of deregulating labour markets, privatising public services, dismantling social protection, etc.

While poverty has always existed and probably will never be totally eradicated, today’s societies certainly have better ways and resources to fight it than what is currently being proposed by international organisations. Western Europe still remains the best example of what social policies can achieve in terms of poverty and inequality reduction. The structural and organic solidarity mechanisms that Western European countries introduced almost a century ago – and which are now being dismantled – have helped to prevent poverty and to eradicate extreme poverty. These values remain utterly important and should guide international development cooperation policies. Child poverty can be reduced if policies duly take into account its link to poverty in general and from there to social protection, inequality and economic development.

Finally, the important problem of child poverty also shows how crucial it is to stop fragmenting the different problems we are faced with. While academic research may need to single out specific issues, their policy implications should include the broader context in which they are present. Research into ‘the poorest of the poor’ is one thing, designing policies to help them is impossible without taking into account the other poor and the non-poor. To give some recent examples: is it acceptable to condemn child slavery practices at cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast, without condemning the child labour and the working conditions in general at these plantations? Or to give the example of austerity policies in Greece: is it acceptable to help poor Greek children, without looking at the living conditions of their parents and the equity of the government austerity measures imposed on them?

Poverty eradication policies in general and child poverty policies in particular can never succeed if families have no economic or social security, if societies are not protected against markets, if countries cannot compete on an equal footing with others. However well-intended
the political focus on child poverty is, we also have some arguments to suspect that it is meant to make us just ignore and forget this broader dimension. This is why I want to put the focus on ‘globalisation’, which should be synonymous with ‘development’. In fact, the problem of climate change, which threatens us all, should be an opportunity to re-think the development models of Northern and Southern countries. While the failures of the current economic system, causing poverty, hunger and conflict, might be an opportunity to re-think the ways we might do better. But then, of course, this involves power relations, and these are less easy to remodel.

Questions for debate and discussion

• What do children’s rights have to say about poverty?
• Does it make sense to exclusively focus on child poverty? In policy? In research?
• Is specific attention for child poverty part of the problem or part of the solution?
• Why is it better to focus on social protection than on poverty reduction?
• What image of childhood prevails in the global poverty debate?

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