

Chapter 5

Child Poverty and Social Inequalities in Africa: A Social Justice Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Africa has continually faced challenges in providing public services for its vast populations culminating in wider inequality gaps and rising levels of child poverty. Consequently, child poverty has led to dim prospects for most children. This chapter discusses child poverty and social inequalities since these aspects are critical to child development and welfare. An analytic review of World Bank and United Nations agencies data was conducted, consisting of existing surveyed data and literature on contemporary contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. It was noted how inadequate investment levels; children's voicelessness and a lack of social security safety nets, has negatively impacted children's rights and development. Indications are that child poverty and other social inequalities continue to be experienced in most parts of the continent despite the economic rise in some of these emerging economies.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws part of its analysis and findings from the author's previous broader study on educational inequalities in Africa. It is noted that while extreme poverty has fallen globally over the last 30 years, from about 40% to under 20%, most African countries have barely extricated themselves from the yoke of poverty. Sub-Saharan Africa still records over 40% of people living in abject poverty and most of these are children (World Bank, 2014). Sub-Saharan Africa continues to record higher levels of poverty; unchecked corruption, the higher incidence of disease, poor infrastructure, poor economic growth, fluctuating and unstable democracies that are prone to conflict and civil war (World Bank 2014; Moyo, 2010; Salih, 2001). These sad and unfavourable descriptions shared by most Africa countries are closely tied to various manifestations, but primarily child poverty and social inequalities. Over 600 million children live in Africa, with at least 40-50 per cent of children in most African countries living

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below the poverty line (World Bank, 2014). It is noted that in sub-Saharan Africa alone, 247 million children are deprived of their basic rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Key among such forms of deprivation include lack of access to water, food, healthcare, shelter, and education. From the 30 sub-Saharan countries, UNICEF estimates that two-thirds of children tend to suffer from two or more of the deprivations stated above (Garcia, 2015).

One of the major reasons for focusing on child poverty and social inequalities is because these are a social justice and human rights issue. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 Article 1, states that ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’ This means that those degraded by poverty tend to have less or no rights as citizens in their countries. They have less dignity and less equality and freedom. The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child provides for child protection from poverty (article 26). The Convention, which almost all African governments have ratified, considers children to be people under the age of 18. It is also often stated that children are the future of every nation and that a nation’s future strength and posterity can largely be measured and guaranteed with quality investment in its children. Part of the reason why Africa has perpetually faced the scourge of underdevelopment could be due to low levels of investment and lack of social security for her children (World Bank, 2014). Africa has 81 per 1000 under 5 mortality rates, which is seven times that of Europe (WHO, 2015). Most of these avoidable deaths are due to child poverty; inequalities and low-level investment on child welfare. Africa continues to have a disproportionate concentration of poverty among children compared to adults. The Status of Poverty Report showed that both rural and urban children were more likely to be poor than adults (World Bank 2014). There is, therefore, compelling rationale to seek to understand better the state of child poverty in Africa. It is noted that Africa may not turn a corner in its quest for success and economic development if there is no political will to uphold children’s rights and economic welfare. Poverty in Africa will mostly likely continue to rise unless the benefits of economic development reach its people through the establishment of social security and safety nets, especially for children.

Definitions of Poverty

Child poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon and needs to be measured and understood in many ways (UNICEF 2016). In basic terms, poverty refers to general scarcity and a state of material lack. Child poverty is not just about lack of money. UNESCO 2015 defines absolute poverty and destitution as a lack of means necessary to meet basic needs. For children, these may include food, clothing, healthcare and shelter. There is also relative poverty. Sabates (2008), defines this as varying from country to country and occurring when people do not enjoy a certain minimum level of living standards compared to the rest of their population. In most parts of Africa, especially the rural areas, governments have been slow in providing basic needs, leading to soaring levels of deprivation, compared to the urban areas. This has been due in part to government’s lack of political will, lack of resources, tax avoidance, poor policy implementation, corruption and the mass exodus of healthcare and educational professionals to cities or other greener pastures. Child poverty and deprivation therefore tends to be experienced differently in urban and rural areas by comparison, but is more likely to be severe in rural areas due to low levels of investment and infrastructure. UNICEF (2016)’s approaches to child poverty both from a monetary and non-monetary perspective, involve moving many children out of monetary poverty and simultaneously ensuring they are not hungry or malnourished.

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