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Assessing Sustainable Development Goals from the standpoint of equity for children

Alberto Minujin* and Mildred Ferrer

The New School, International Affairs, New York, NY, USA

The article develops a discourse about equality for children and their recent evolution from adult-centred consideration to definition as a separate, critical constituency as stated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with their child-focused goals and targets. Challenges implementing equality and fairness are discussed, from the World Summit for Children (WSC) in 1990 to the nearly simultaneous ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which gives children agency through its legally binding clauses, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The article reviews past lessons learned and the post-2015 agenda debate, from which worldwide agreement evolved about multidimensional poverty and an equality roadmap. The article suggests social accountability processes to achieve lasting SDG targets. It provides a methodology for implementing social accountability actions, accompanied by examples to mobilise communities and encourage child and youth participation at the local level.

Keywords: Children; multidimensional poverty; inequality; urban inequality; social accountability

1. Introduction

In the last decades, children have been at the forefront of research agendas and have been the subject of a ratified convention and of optional protocols and international donation campaigns. The international community has agreed that children play a pivotal role in society and that their mere existence bestows on them the same rights as it does adults. They are the present and the future, yet in decades since awarding national and global priority to the fulfilment of their rights, the efforts have been insufficient. This reality, which speaks to the limitations of international agreements and human rights charters, is evidenced in growing inequalities experienced by children, which manifests itself in relation not only to income but also to education, health, gender, ethnicity and access to social services. Through research and experience, practitioners, organisations and academics have been able to provide insight into the complex reality of poverty and its disproportionate effect on children. In doing so, children's advocates agree that ending the poverty cycle must begin with children.

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*Corresponding author. Email: minujina@newschool.edu

The objective of this article is to argue that with child poverty and multidimensional considerations on the post-2015 agenda, the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for ending the poverty cycle necessitates an equity-focused approach starting in early childhood. It proposes social accountability, child and adolescent participation, and local action as the next steps for advancing the goals.

The paper starts with a brief discussion of childhood and social justice, as well as children and world summit goals. Following the introductory sections, we discuss the lessons learned since the 1990s, and the debate surrounding the post-2015 agenda in relation to equality and child poverty. We then move on to the advances and challenges of the SDGs and the implications for the children's well-being agenda. Next, we present evidence and discuss how social accountability and local approaches can help to move the SDGs forward. The paper concludes providing closing remarks and steps for advancing the proposed social accountability strategy for implementation of the SDGs.

2.   Children, social justice and rights

The notion of social justice is thoroughly articulated by Fraser (2003, 2009) as a balanced interconnection between recognition, redistribution and representation. While Fraser does not specifically make a distinction about children, she points out the persistence of misrepresentation and maldistribution suffered by 'low-status groups'. Thus, redistribution, as Fraser proposes it, in childhood implies ensuring the survival and development of the contemplations made within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in which the provision of protection of childhood makes the case for recognition but also relates to redistribution, as this is dependent on the provision of adequate public budget. There are inherent obstacles to the fulfilment of protection given the historical misrepresentation of children as a dependent group, whose participation in society is thought to be limited or determined by adult actions (James, 2009; Lee, 2001). Children as a group suffer from both maldistribution and misrecognition, a state that Fraser refers to as a bivalent collectivity[1]; institutionalisation of these socially conceptualised norms, Fraser claims, can only be addressed through both politics of recognition and politics of redistribution.

Politics of representation requires to give children a voice as a collective social group in society. This reconceptualisation of childhood has resulted in the expansion of childhood studies and the implementation of methodologies for working directly with children and young people (Tisdall, 2012). Following the work developed by Corsaro (2005) and others, childhood has been reshaped as a social phenomenon and a creative paradigm on children's agency. Giving children consideration as part of the social structure, with a 'voice' and representation, allows us to think of them as collective agents of social change. In 2009, Qvortrup, Corsaro, and Honig further that 'the question is whether it is relevant and plausible to see children as constructive actors in society and to perceive childhood in structural terms' (p. 22); taking this idea means perceiving childhood not as a temporal period, or a transitional period towards adulthood, but rather a permanent component of the social structure. Recognising and acknowledging children as social agents with individual, and also collective rights to participate, is an evolving movement (Tisdall, 2012; Woodhead, 2011). This notion could be relevant in terms of social accountability and monitoring of the SDGs, as it will later be discussed.

3.   A brief history: children and world summit goals

The years preceding the 1990 World Summit for Children (WSC) emphasised the idea of human development. The conversation evolved into the assertion that children have an

inherent role in human development and that investment in children is central to development (Jolly, 2011). The summit generated a set of 27 specific goals related to children's survival, health, nutrition, education and protection.[2] Along with the adoption of the CRC in 1989, the WSC had its pinnacle at the joint signing of the World Declaration of the Survival, Protection and Development of Children comprising the goals to be met by the year 2000.

The CRC, which came into effect in 1990, consists of a set of guiding principles and four categories of rights: protection, survival, development and participation. In view of the special status of children, the CRC imposed a level of obligations on states to protect, fulfil and respect their rights. This was the first international treaty to incorporate the complete range of international human rights along with aspects of humanitarian law.[3] The CRC internationally binds states that have ratified it to act in the best interest of children and their rights, while the WSC proposed a set of goals aimed at realising those rights. A relevant criticism of the CRC, as described by Tisdall, is its depiction of 'global childhood', wherein childhood is regarded as an applicable instrument in both the Majority and Minority Worlds.[4] Moreover, the fact that its creation and conception did not include children and young people, but was disproportionately dominated by and focused on Minority World countries, and the Western prioritisation of individual rights (Bentley, 2005; Ghai, 2000; Van Bueren, 2011). Tisdall and other scholars (Grugel, 2013) argue that perhaps the popularity of the CRC stem from its 'lack of teeth', referring to its enforceability at the international level, and that 'like many international conventions, the CRC's phrasing allows for considerable interpretation at best, and manipulation at worst' (p. 18).

The WSC occurred almost simultaneously to the ratification of the CRC, both bringing about the shared objective of establishing time-bound, measurable goals mainly linked to children's needs. Adopting these measurable, internationally binding goals that were ambitious yet attainable was a pioneering endeavour of the summit. The goals established at the WSC included the following characteristics:

- Measurability: there has to be a way to determine progress of the goal and targets;
- Attainability: there must be a clear path, if not easy or certain, to achieving the goal and targets;
- Time-bound: there must be a specific timeframe.

These goals have generated the highest levels of commitment on behalf of children. However, many argue that the WSC goals 'addressed only the symptoms of poverty', suggesting that intrinsic causes were being left out.[5] The CRC included a distinction between national and global averages in measuring progress, stating,

> These goals will first need to be adapted to the specific realities of each country. […] Such adaptation of the goals is of crucial importance to ensure their technical validity, logistical feasibility, financial affordability and to secure political commitment and broad public support for their achievement. (UNICEF, 1990 in Vandemoortele, 2012a, 2012b)

However, setting sights on national and global averages to measure progress has hindered the ability to account for conditions prevailing among the lowest fifth or lower third of society.[6] Measuring progress based on national averages or global aggregates can conceal broad disparities in poverty and children's development at local and regional levels (UNICEF, 2010). Many examples can be cited that support this argument, and time in fact proved this to be one of the most important lessons learned from the decade.

3.1. *Moving from needs to rights*

The Convention changed the consideration of children from objects of compassion to subjects of rights. This implies that all of them, without any kind of restriction or discrimination, are entitled to goods and services that allow them to articulate their full capabilities as active citizens in society (Himes, 1995). The need and relevance of recognising children and young people as active and full citizens, and childhood as a collective active part of society has also been part of the struggle of the movement 'from minors to citizens' (Gomez da Costa, 1992). As Baratta (2001, p. 284) states

> the adoption of the formula 'from minors to citizen' places us within an ongoing process, as yet incomplete … thus expresses our memory of the future. Going back to being a child alone would not suffice to turn a minor into a citizen.

The CRC gives a crucial change to the consideration of children from objects of compassion to subjects of rights; however, becoming a citizen requires special emphasis on recognition and representation.

Understanding the relevance for society to accept and give recognition, representation and full citizenship to children is still an ongoing process (Bartell & O'Donnell, 2001). How people, and in particular young people and children, understand citizenship is still a topic that needs much research (Jones & Gaventa, 2002). One of the first and seminal studies that explore this topic (Lister, Smith, Middleton, & Cox, 2003) was carried out in a three-year qualitative longitudinal study in the East Midlands city of Leicester. The study showed that the majority of participants subscribed to a communitarian model of citizenship in which they recognised the community or neighbourhood as part of their 'identity', and a territory where they are willing to participate as citizens. The communitarian model emphasises on this approach to citizenship (Lister, 2007). However, to be continuously engaged requires social participation and the right to a voice, which are central to Lister's idea of 'citizenship in social-contractual terms' (p. 239). It is imperative to regard children as citizens and participants in the broader social context and include them in the political process. Cockburn (2013) articulates the importance of

> … rethinking of citizenship away from liberal individual notions to one that emphasizes social interdependence and calls for concomitant re-evaluations of our public spaces to enable the intersectionality of children's identities and a safe and constructive way for the dialogue of dialectics of generation to be facilitated. (p. 17)

However, the advancement of the Summit's goals and targets were undertaken largely based on the traditional needs-based approach. There is a general consensus that the needs-based approach failed to give children agency and empower them to assert their rights. Instead the approach identified basic requirements for human development, and advocated for their fulfilment. This proved temporarily successful, for example, in health interventions like the expansion of immunisation coverage, but it did not contemplate giving children and families rights entitlement. The ratification of the CRC and implementation of the WSC goals put into question the reliability of previous approaches and encouraged a shift towards a rights-based approach, that regarded children as subjects of rights, as opposed to objects of protection. The rights-based approach has a deep-rooted intention of a more equitable distribution of available resources for the realisation of human rights.

4.   Including children beyond averages: lessons from the WSC and MDGs

In preparation for the new millennium and a new development agenda, then Secretary General Kofi Annan reflected on the achievements and shortfalls of the WSC. He praised the merits of a 'goal-focused approach', and asserted the effectiveness of setting time-bound, objective targets that provide a basis for regular monitoring of their progress. One of the fundamental concerns that remained from the summit was the gap between promises and action.

Now regarded as a set of standards, the WSC lingers as a guide for policy and action.

In 2000, as part of the Millennium Summit, the Millennium Declaration presented a synthesis of agreed-upon goals and targets. This time, a set of 8 major goals and 18 targets, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), set specific, time-bound objectives to be met by the year 2015. Relevant indicators for each target, 48 in total, were selected to monitor the progress of the MDGs. Much like the WSCs' goals, the MDGs were not conceived with a budget nor did they specifically map out who was responsible for what (Vandemoortele & Delamonica, 2010). In fact, when world leaders agreed to the targets set at the Millennium Summit, they did so 'on the premise that the targets would be met collectively, not necessarily by each and every country' (Vandemoortele, 2009). The MDGs refer to changes in average situations. The numerical targets, Vandemoortele says, have been set on the basis of global trends, making it a mistake to overemphasise countries that are off-target.

4.1.   *Attempts of times past*

The 1990s taught us that advancing an agenda for children can be done through initiatives that include child-specific targets. As do most processes, the implementation and advancement of the targets set between 1990 and 2000 had its faults. One of the most important lessons learned from past summits is that focusing attention on average change at the global level is not the optimal approach when trying to understand conditions on the ground that affect the most disadvantaged. A shortfall of global targets is that they do not account for a local context.

A study[7] on the results of the goals for children presents clear evidence that gains on the goals, when disaggregated by wealth, can be attributed to the improvement at the top quintiles, thus revealing that the situation for children in families at the bottom 20%, or poorest groups, did not improve at all or had only relatively small gains. The study, which focused on analysing the achievements on infant mortality in 24 developing countries, specifically under-five mortality rate (U5MR) reductions shows not only an unequal trend in progress for different groups but displays a widening gap between the top and bottom quintiles. The authors conclude that a more equitable approach would have positive implications on the MDGs, allowing the realisation of the two-thirds reductions in U5MR (Minujin & Delamonica, 2003).

Shown in Figure 1, the study clearly illustrates the disparities in advancement between different groups within countries. Minujin and Delamonica estimate that most countries follow a top-down approach that results in the most disadvantaged households lined up waiting to reap the benefits of policies and interventions that fulfil their rights. The research reveals,

> If the egalitarian approach had been used, the numbers of averted deaths would have been more than twice as large (5.2 million). […] In other words, while the observed decline in the U5MR was from an average of 127 to 105, under the egalitarian approach[8] the reduction would have been 20% higher, reaching an average U5MR of 85 (i.e. around 20% lower).
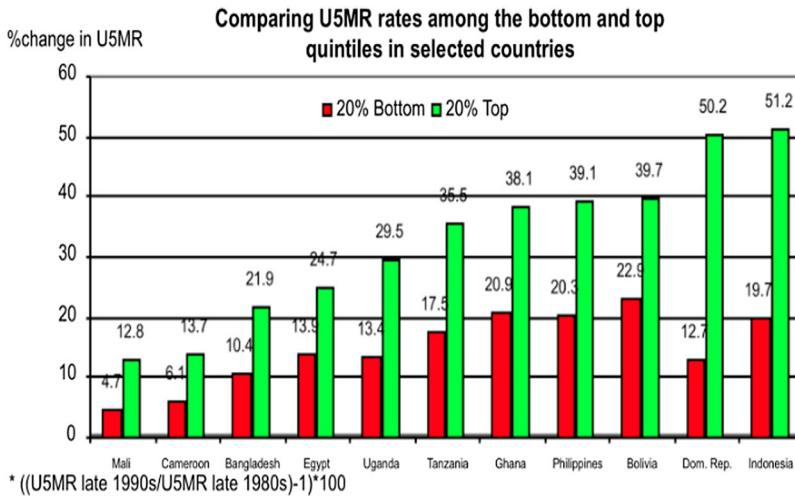
Figure 1. Statistically significant reductions in U5RM occurred among the top 20%. Source: Minujin and Delamonica, *Journal of Human Development* (November 2003).

4.2. *Creating a roadmap for equity*

A key debate surged about the importance of incorporating into the goals a precise search for equality, measurement and monitoring of the achievement in the context of equity. This debate, which remained largely neutral during the course of the MDGs, gained momentum in the conversations surrounding the post-2015 agenda, accompanied by conversations on multidimensional poverty. From the post-2015 debates, the two main points we will address are equality and multidimensional poverty and child poverty. A 2015 report by Save the Children International delivers the message that post-2015 goals should shift focus to closing the 'systematic disparities' that are present in children's life chances. Most of the post-MDGs conversation in the context of children was driven by this fundamental lesson from the MDGs and the WSCs' goals: that the focus on global and national averages failed to account for growing inequalities that disproportionately affect children.[9]

The post-2015 debate seems to have left a broad consensus among stakeholders about using the equity approach to address multidimensional extreme poverty. While there was sufficient evidence collected and reported, the importance and opportunity to incorporate targets that address inequalities into the agenda were missed. In their 2015 report 'Approaches to Equity', the organisation Equity for Children (EFC) stresses the importance of a common understanding of the meaning of equity, as it is 'essential in providing a framework for collaboration across sectors'. The same study synthesises the conceptualisation of equity from participant responses and arrives at the term *fairness* as the common factor.

Another commonality found among responses was the importance of differentiating equity and equality, which Jessica Espey, former Senior Research and Policy Advisor at Save the Children, describes as follows:

> [Equity] …is the practical manifestation of trying to realize equality. It recognizes that not everyone can be equal because of physical differences, social differences, and so on and so forth. But equity is the way to try and realize the principle of equality in the most practical and pragmatic way.

In this sense, inequity is related with unfair inequalities and it is the measure that can be used to monitor disparities on the achievements of goals by different social, ethnic, religious groups and geographical locations. Particularly important is taking into consideration 'durable inequalities' (Tilly, 2005) or 'horizontal inequalities' (Stewart, 2002). These are not the ones that rank individuals or families according to an ordinal structure, for example, income, or wealth level, but are categorical; linked to processes of discrimination and exclusion (Kabeer, 2000, 2006). The studies that include children and young people show that the daily experience related with an expression of discrimination or exclusion produce a lasting and deep negative effect on them (Boyden & Crivello, 2012).

The most pressing challenge to move ahead with a greater focus on the most disadvantaged is more political than technical. It implies emphasising the agenda of redistribution, which governments are sometimes reluctant to do (Ferreira, 2013; Morgan, 2013). Throughout the MDGs, especially focusing on groups that are easier to reach seems to be the most common action by some governments, enticed by goals whose targets only call for the achievement of certain percentage levels. Some references point to the difficulty in reaching more remote or rural communities when implementing policies at the national level, given cost and complexity (UNICEF, 2010). In a 2013 study on intra-urban inequalities, Bartlett et al. emphasise that inequalities are more predominant within cities than between urban and rural areas. The report identifies four important inequalities faced by urban dwellers: economic, political, spatial and social. As pertaining to children, the study found the following:

- Unreliable income hinders opportunities for investment in assets that could enhance opportunities, such as children's education;
- Young children who are urban dwellers experience extreme inequalities in health;
- The lowest-income households have little or no political representation.

More than 50% of children live in urban areas where averages mask huge intra-urban inequalities and exclusions affecting children and adolescents. In Latin America, for example, three out of every four children live in cities, and the growth in urban population, which estimates that nine out of ten Latin Americans will live in cities by 2050, will be accompanied by the further increases in social inequalities and urban disparities. The 'urban advantage' premise will not be enjoyed by those who live in highly deprived households, which account for more than 30% of those living in urban areas. Figure 2 offers a collection of data showing relative gaps in Latin America and the Caribbean for adolescents (ages 12–17) residing in 'highly deprived' urban areas, who are three times more likely not to attend school and work than children from the 'non-deprived' urban areas (Born, Delamonica, & Minujin, 2015).

A UN-HABITAT (2014) study revealed that Latin American countries that show an average reduction of the national Gini coefficient present growing income urban inequalities. Bartlett et al. highlight the improvements of some Latin American cities in reducing inequalities, where past and present mayors have provided access to improved healthcare and other services. The authors also recount the use of participatory budgeting to counter political exclusion, which some local governments in Latin America have instituted as a channel for local residents to 'influence the city's budget and investment priorities'.

4.3. *Searching for recognition of child poverty*

Poverty is a crucial factor in determining child survival and development inequities.[10] Important debates have surged in the last decades regarding how poverty should be
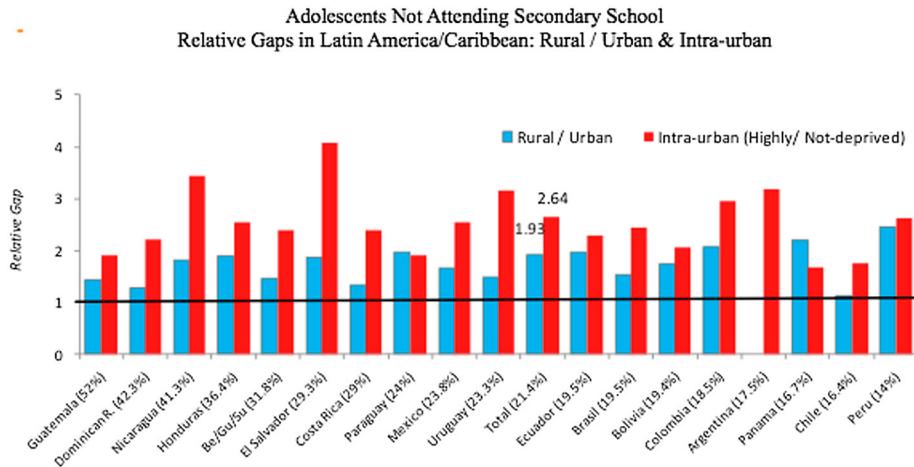
Figure 2.   Secondary school absences among rural and urban adolescents in Latin America. Source: National Household Surveys (Circa 2009).

defined and measured, as well as the relevance of measuring child poverty. The definition of the SDGs has been positively influenced by these debates. Regarding measuring and defining poverty several scholars have argued that income poverty is limited, misleading and 'absurdly low' in particular the World Bank's definition in relation to expenditure levels of $1.25 per day (Braathen, Wright, & May, 2016; Edward & Sumner, 2014; Gordon, 2006; Reddy & Pogge, 2010). There is a growing consensus that income poverty is 'insufficient' to capture the extension and diversity of the problem, thus making it necessary to move to multidimensional definition measures of poverty. The many overlapping deprivations and the lack of access to quality basic services are not well captured by the money-metric measure of poverty (Lang & Lingnau, 2015).

Children experience poverty differently than adults do, and the effects of child poverty, even if only experienced for a short period can have a lifelong effect on that child's development (Boyden, Eyber, Feeny, & Scott, 2003; Minujin, Delamonica, & Komarecki, 2006). Halfway through the MDGs, children's poverty experience was still not being differentiated from poverty in general, and its special dimensions, according to UNICEF (2005), were seldom recognised. Given the different experiences between child poverty and adult poverty, organisations including UNICEF (1990, 2006), Save the Children Sweden (2003), and The Childhood Poverty Research and Policy Center (2004) have provided insights into what is meant by child poverty. A commonly accepted definition explains that children living in poverty are 'deprived of nutrition, water and sanitation facilities, access to basic health-care services, shelter, education, participation and protection'. This emphasises that while poverty evidenced by lack of access to goods and services can be harmful to all human beings, 'it is most threatening and harmful to children, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, to reach their full potential and to participate as full members of society' (Gordon, Nandy, Pantazis, Pemberton, & Townsend, 2003; Minujin & Nandy, 2012; UNGA, 2006). Social, gender, ethnic, religious and other discriminations have a strong impact on poor children, 'when children living in poverty speak about their lives, they often highlight the anger, frustration, sadness and hopelessness they feel, linked to repeated instances of discrimination and exclusion' (Save the Children, 2016).

The debate on poverty has also been concerned with the potential causes of poverty and how it can be measured[11] and compared at the international and national levels (Jones & Sumner, 2011; Minujin, McCaffrey, Patel, & Paienjton, 2014). Studies such as Mind the Gap have determined that children from the lower quintile do not enjoy the same access to basic services as do their peers in the top quintile (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Minujin et al., 2006; UNICEF, 2010).[12] Evidence shows that these deprivations constituting poverty cannot be tackled without addressing the underlying inequality of opportunities to access quality services as well as equality of results. Arriving at a common definition was essential in moving the conversation forward and, according to Pogge and Rippin (2013), agreeing on a definition would indeed provide the basis for a universally applicable goal framework.

Regarding universality for a 2015 development agenda, SOS Children's Villages and others proposed a set of child sensitive indicators, in early 2015 based on two fundamental points. The first referred to the disaggregation of data in a way that provides an explicit focus on equity. In addition to using common qualifiers, they suggest the use of care status of children, which refers to a child's living arrangements (i.e. out of the family, with biological parents, formal or informal, etc.). The post-2015 Open Working Group[13] goes a step further and advocates, 'Data should also be disaggregated by all grounds of discrimination prohibited by international human rights law, including *inter alia* by sex, age, race, ethnicity, income, location, disability, and other grounds most relevant to specific countries and contexts.' Disaggregating data will be essential to keep track of equity gaps and to ensure that gaps widened during the MDGs are, in fact, narrowing. The merits of a multidimensional approach are exemplified by the advantages of data disaggregation, which reveals a picture of what groups are more likely to experience different types of deprivations.

The second point touches on methods of acquiring and using data. If a multidimensional approach is to be used in addressing child poverty, relying on income data alone will not suffice as it would be incomplete. It gives little or no consideration to household structure, gender and age, which are important components of the information that the multidimensional approach relies on (Minujin et al., 2006). Also, it gives no information about issues related to public services, care and protection not provided by the market. Several international agencies and organisations encourage the use of multidimensional approaches to measuring poverty and child poverty, such as the Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA)[14] and the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). Alkire and Sumner (2013) add that the MPI (2.0)[15] 'would complement' a monetary measure, such as the current $1.25/day. It would do so by 'showing how people are poor' in reference to their disadvantages and it would also reveal inequalities between those living in poverty. There are a growing number of developing countries that are including the multidimensional measure of poverty and child poverty in their current national statistical reports. A survey by UNICEF (2015) shows that 59 of 147 countries are not currently measuring child poverty; meanwhile, in over 70 countries child poverty measures are part of the ongoing dialogue with governments, aiming to include triggering policy and programme response as well as national action plans.

The repercussions of poverty on children were voiced loud and clear early in the post-2015 meetings. Lifting children out of poverty and helping them stay out of poverty can have positive outcomes not only for children but for their families and communities; it can reduce the chances of poverty being further perpetuated across generations. While a post-2015 agenda should not be considered as a white canvas, it potentially offers an opportunity to correct some of the mistakes that have been made in the past, especially the 'blind spot to inequality of the MDGs' (Save the Children, 2014a, 2014b).

5. The SDGs: advancing a child-inclusive framework

Building on the progress and addressing the shortcomings of the MDGs, the new agenda presents an evolved set of goals and targets. Unlike previous agendas, the new goals and targets capture issues that are crucially related to children's rights.[16] The SDGs address aspects such as health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5) and violence against children (SDG 16.2). Moreover, combating child poverty and reducing inequality are both recognised and will have to be addressed in the implementation strategies towards 2030. This does not represent a small task. It has taken years of debate, research, practice and patience to get to this point.

The debate on child poverty has necessitated time to incorporate specific targets that address the different dimensions of poverty specific to children, and also to develop targets focused on reducing inequalities and indicators that allow us to keep track of equity gaps. The recognition of child-specific poverty (SDG 1.2) is a significant step forward, in that it represents immense progress for children. The target makes two key points beyond the overarching agreement to end poverty: it calls for the reduction of poverty in all of its dimensions, thus taking into account poverty beyond income. It also recognises the importance and ability to measuring the targets by national definitions.

Of equal importance is the formulation of SDG 10 'to reduce inequality *within* and *among* countries'. Inequalities have widened within countries, even in times of economic growth. These disparities jeopardise the advancement and achievement of goals such as eliminating extreme poverty because of their overarching economic impact. UNDP conducted a global survey,[17] in which policy-makers from around the world remark on the pressing effects of inequality noting, '[inequality] in their countries is generally high and a potential threat to long-term social and economic development' (UNDP, 2013). Furthermore, the study, whose results had an influence on the SDGs, presents evidence from developing countries showing that children in the lowest 20% of the population are three times more likely to die before age five. Plan International's CEO, Anne-Birgitte Albrectsen asserted, 'The pursuit of equity or fairness, is what binds all the goals together' (Plan International, 2015).

There are fundamental differences between the MDGs and the SDGs, not just for children but also in a general sense. The SDGs are broader and more ambitious; the new agenda commits to 'getting to zero' in areas such as poverty and child deaths, whereas the MDGs sought the reduction of these ills. The new agenda should be highly regarded, as it enhances the strengths of the MDGs, and goes a step forward in recognising how children are disproportionately affected by violence, deprivations and inequality, and accepts the value of children's participation in goal-setting and implementation efforts.

Now that equity to realise equality and multidimensional poverty to address child poverty have been included in the post-2015 agenda, the conversation transitions to implementation strategies allowing for the realisation of all goals and targets. Now that the *what* is clearer, there is still uncertainty about the *how* and the *who* are accountable for the progress and changes required to achieve the goals and targets; and it is in this regard, social accountability could play an important role.

6. Social accountability, local action, and children's voice

Social accountability is a process between the state and citizenry and it is a form of vertical accountability.[18] It is an engagement of citizen groups, children and their representatives in overseeing government conducts (Gibbons, 2015). Often a bottom-up approach, social

accountability mechanisms are demand-driven and can be initiated by either the state or citizens (Gibbons, 2015, p. 9; Malena, Forster, & Singh, 2004). Social accountability represents a shift of power from the state to the people, 'especially to poor people and marginalised children', thus enhancing its potential for advancing equity. Advancing the SDGs agenda on child-related goals will mostly take place at the local level. This is where constituents have a say in what actions should be taken and where they experience the effects of those efforts. A coalition of organisations[19] including Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, UNICEF and others (2014) agree that the primary focus of accountability should be directed at the local level. They offer that the mechanisms can take the form of scorecards or social audits. World Vision International (2014) agreed and added methods such as participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, focus groups, and management committees. That is not to say that all changes will happen at the local level or that local action alone will drive the SDGs. A bottom-up approach should be accompanied by positive changes in structurally inequitable conditions and macroeconomic measures. This should happen alongside top-down policies for social inclusion and protection. Only in a context where the economic condition, social policies, and political will are favourable to social inclusion and social justice can local policies flourish and expand.

The overarching principle of accountability should be implemented to achieve greater equity, attained through greater accountability of states to their citizens at the local level and by global institutions to states (Gibbons, 2015). The mechanisms should be accompanied by child and youth participation, as evidence shows that 'when children are provided with the opportunities to participate, they develop cognitive abilities, respect for others, self-esteem and social skills, the ability to think critically and a robust understanding and exercise of democratic citizenship' (World Vision International, 2014). Thus, for children at the local level, social accountability is a tool that can serve to address and ensure the provision of services that impact their well-being. ChildFund Alliance and its members are promoting monitoring mechanisms to ensure that children have not only a 'place at the table where their present and future are being negotiated but also the opportunity to engage in the interpretation and follow-up of these agreements'. As we discussed, children's participation in this mechanism, however, faces the obstacle of dependence on adult intermediaries, as well as political constraints. Moving ahead will require an important step forward in terms of recognition and representation, given the considerations expressed earlier in this article. This implies central changes in the families', communities' and societies' roles and power distribution to move from an adulthood-centred culture to a more horizontal and power-shared situation with children and young people, with particular focus on girls (Bustelo, 2011).

Beyond serving as a control tool, social accountability should be regarded as an important link for children and youth to be able to hold their duty bearers accountable (Nguyen, 2013). Ultimately, the goal and challenge are promoting participatory and empowering engagement to monitor government performance at different levels.

Capacity-building efforts about community engagement and methods of social accountability, child and youth participation can eventually lead to transferring ownership of projects to be conducted entirely by communities. This would translate into strength and resilience. Its relative inexpensiveness makes it a sustainable option to improve child well-being at the local level. World Vision International estimates that 'by raising awareness about rights, entitlements and the performance of critical services like healthcare and education, we can lay the foundation for an evidence-based dialogue between citizens and government'. The literature on accountability, which is extensive, rarely mentions children as stakeholders,[20] which emphasises the importance of better understanding how social

accountability mechanisms are being implemented and are progressing on the ground, thus assessing its effects beyond its definition.

World Vision International cites a successful project started in Brazil in 2010, where youth were provided with the tools necessary to undertake a social accountability approach that included an understanding, that government officials and politicians are public employees who are accountable to citizens. With this understanding, the young participants engaged with municipal representatives and formed an alliance to request funds from the Ministry of Education to repair a local school. For children and youth to actively and importantly participate in the process of achieving the SDGs, they must understand their rights. It is the only way they will be able to take ownership of them and hold duty-bearers accountable.

Between 2013 and 2014, EFC along with Corona Foundation and the civil society organisation (CSO) 'Cómo Vamos' undertook a project on social accountability entitled 'Early Childhood Cómo Vamos: Identifying Inequalities to Foster Childhood Equity in Colombia'. The project was designed to foster 'evidence-based public policies grounded in social accountability and civic engagement to promote child well-being and reduce inequalities'. The local action was combined with a national social programme called 'De 0 a Siempre' (From Birth to Forever), whose objective was to ensure a good start in life for children from birth to three years of age. The bottom-up social accountability approach of this project sought to create a positive synergy with the nationally legislated top-down programme seeking to ensure greater access and equity for children from the most disadvantaged urban populations. The study revealed significant inequalities, such as a U5MR five times higher in the most disadvantaged areas of Bogotá. Similarly, children in disadvantaged counties were found to be five times more likely not to attend preschool than their counterparts in less-disadvantaged counties. The study approach included strategies such as discussing findings in the context of available policies for young children and disseminating the information through social media, developing action plans in collaboration with local authorities and community committees, and promoting knowledge through easy-to-understand materials.[21]

Social accountability strategies must be undertaken carefully. For instance, it is important to note the preconditions of the setting where implementation will take place. The capacity building needs vary in every locality. Providing technical knowledge transfer workshops, citizen groups that include youth and children and long lasting working groups can be part of capacity building efforts in the social accountability framework. Each area's economic and political conditions are also exceptionally relevant. A 'friendly' country context will increase the likelihood of success. Moreover, the scalability of the actions should be kept in mind; the goal is for action at the local level to translate to policy at the national level. Conducting locally based analysis and considering participant consensus can ensure that the mechanisms help reduce childhood inequalities and are sustainable beyond implementation. Gibbons (2015) offers that social accountability can achieve outcomes to narrow equity gaps by rectifying service failures, providing alternatives, offering compensation, imposing sanctions for duty-bearers and developing legislation reform or a shift in public planning. The EFC study revealed some challenges for implementing social accountability strategies; the lack of disaggregated data and lack of clear local accountability mechanisms were important realisations. Furthermore, the study identified the need to strengthen participation from local communities, families and children and promoting synergy between local CSOs. The following is a social accountability approach that synthesises some good practices to help generate the appropriate feedback needed to tackle inequities:

- *Research and data analysis* in each city should include childhood inequity data from publicly available sources as well as from contextual data, opinions of local leaders and CSOs, project partners and influencers, citizen voices and a survey of municipal and government institutions, initiatives supporting children's rights and international and national child rights laws and conventions such as the Convention of the Rights of the Child.
- *Negotiation and consensus building* encourage dialogue and advocacy among children, local civil society leaders and national, municipal and sub-municipal decision-makers. Workshops with government decision-makers in each city to present child well-being measurement findings will highlight inequities and proposed solutions leading to commitments that improve interventions targeting the most disadvantaged children.
- *Communication and media work* should be organised through workshops and briefings, offering a report summary and publication to help deepen knowledge of children's rights and the outcomes of each city study. Outreach to academic and institutional networks, local and national media, online and in print, and interactive social media channels will mobilise ongoing exchange, participation and shared experiences.
- *Periodic participatory monitoring of the situation* in order to analyse and track changes in inequalities and the impact of actions defined by local and national government authorities and other local stakeholders.

7.   Final remarks and next steps

This article has presented substantial information related to children's rights, how those rights have been formulated, defended, approached and the extent of the work that has been undertaken to help realise them. Also, we discussed the limitations and challenges that face making children's rights a reality. The last three decades have seen many advances in putting children and youth at the forefront of development efforts. However, clearly it was not enough. The WSC and the CRC provided a set of guiding tools and legislation to set in motion many of society's important achievements towards children. Next the MDGs revealed the shortcomings of past efforts, and prompted a conversation about moving forward by addressing widening gaps of inequality, and the harrowing effects of child poverty. The road to 2030 will be guided by 25 years of evidence, proving that children around the world are disproportionately affected by conflict, poverty and inequalities.

The inclusion of children in the post-2015 agenda is just one means to ensure the reduction of global poverty and inequality that transcends age but it is by no means a resolution. Social accountability can help us to mobilise communities and encourage child and youth participation at the local level to achieve the targets set by the SDGs. Evidence shows that local accountability mechanisms can be implemented at little cost and have long-lasting effects that reach the national level. However, as the article stresses, there are important challenges to this approach not only in relation to important resource redistribution towards the most deprived, but also in terms of recognition of children, in particular the most discriminated and excluded, and also in terms of giving them mechanisms of participation and representation. The article proposes a methodology for implementing these mechanisms, and considerations for replicating them. The cases of Colombia and Brazil presented here are only two of many similar projects taking place at child-focused agencies in different regions and showing that when those at the bottom mobilise, the ones on the top

mobilise as well. We propose the following steps, resulting from the discussion presented in this article, to move the agenda of reducing child poverty and inequalities forward:

(1) Put children, especially the most disadvantaged, at the centre of the policy agenda;
(2) Prioritise community-based approaches that are context-based;
(3) Detach strategies from the idea that 'one size fits all';
(4) Collect and use disaggregated data (sex, age, race, income, disability, location);
(5) Measure multidimensional child poverty on a regular basis;
(6) Invest in inclusive social protection strategies, and address inequities in macroeconomic structures;
(7) Develop measurable targets to keep track of inequities;
(8) Support social accountability mechanisms that enable children and youth to participate and track government performance.

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Notes

1. In *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation* (2003), Nancy Fraser contends that issues such as gender and homosexuality are bivalent collectivities, encompassing both political-economic dimensions and cultural-valuation dimensions, making it imperative to address through attending to both distribution and recognition. Following this approach, childhood can be included in the category of bivalent collective.
2. See '*United Nations Special Session on Children*' for further information and facts about the WSC and the specific goals and targets. Retrieved from, http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/about/worldsummit
3. This included civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights (UNICEF, 2014).
4. The Majority and Minority World are terms used in lieu of the more out-of-date 'developing/developed world' or 'third/first world'.
5. See 'Completing Jim Grant's Agenda' by Jon Rohde in *Jim Grant: UNICEF Visionary*.
6. See note 5.
7. Full study can be found on EFC. Retrieved from, http://www.equityforchildren.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/FinalReport04.28.15.pdf
8. The authors refer with this to an equal improvement on the U5MR at the poorest quintile than the others.
9. See, for example, *A review of the Open Working Group Report on Sustainable Development Goals from a Child Rights Perspective* (UNICEF, 2013); *Leaving no one behind* (Save the Children, 2014a, 2014b).
10. See note 9.
11. For a child poverty measures see, for instance, Alkire, Roche, Seth, and Sumner (2013).
12. See, for instance, Minujin et al. (2006); Alkire and Foster (2011); UNICEF (2010).
13. UNICEF (2014) '*A world for children: Review of OWG Report from a child rights perspective*'. Retrieved from, http://www.unicef.org/post2015/files/Post_2015_OWG_review_CR_FINAL.pdf
14. Currently used by UNICEF Office of Research. See: http://www.unicef-irc.org/MODA
15. Currently used by UNDP.
16. Full list of SDGs and targets. Retrieved from, http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/#
17. Humanity Divided: Confronting Inequality in Developing Countries (UNDP, 2013). Retrieved from, http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/povertyreduction/humanitydividedconfrontinginequalityindevelopingcountries.html

18. Vertical accountability refers to mechanisms that are external to the state and usually led by the citizenry.
19. The organizations were SOS Children's Villages, Child to Child, Children International, Child Fund Alliance, Plan, Save the Children, UNICEF and World Vision. 'Child sensitive accountability and the post-2015 agenda'.
20. See note 19.
21. Red de Ciudades Cómo Vamos, Equidad para la Infancia, Fundación Corona, and Pontifica Universidad Javeriana (2015). *'Informe primera infancia: Identificando desigualdades para impulsar la equidad en la infancia colombiana'*.

Notes on contributors

Alberto Minujin is founder and executive director of Equity for Children/Equidad para la Infancia, an initiative aimed at improving the living conditions of poor, marginalised and underserved children around the world. He is a professor at the International Affairs Program of The New School, New York, with a focus on topics related to social policy and children's rights. He teaches at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (UNTREF), Argentina, and is a member of the University of Bergen, Norway, organisation Comparative Research on Poverty (CROP). Professor Minujin served until 2005 as UNICEF's senior programme officer for policy analysis in the Division of Policy and Planning Headquarters, New York. He consults with UNICEF and other global organisations about multidimensional child poverty measures and civic accountability. In 2010, Minujin was awarded the Argentina Bicentennial Medal, recognising his contributions to the fields of child rights and social policy. He is the author of books, articles and papers about child rights, poverty, social policy and the middle class.

Mildred P. Ferrer is a recent graduate from the International Affairs Graduate Program at The New School in New York. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Psychology with a focus on child and adolescent behaviour from Florida International University in Miami. Her research has focused on poverty alleviation and youth-focused education programmes in marginalised communities in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She holds special interest in urban poverty and inequality.

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