

# **From Social Protection to Social Inclusion for Children in Poverty: Bridging the Disparities with Integrated Policy Design**

**Enrique Delamonica<sup>1</sup>**  
**Tamo Chattopadhyay<sup>2</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Targeting social protection interventions for children in poverty is a well accepted policy paradigm. However, by virtue of their design, targeted policies focused exclusively on poor children remain largely disconnected from the domains of educational and social development of non-poor children in the society. This is because, in stratified societies of the world, rich and the poor children follow vastly divergent paths of education, socialization and social mobility. In this paper, we present research findings from an intervention that purposively links the well-being of the most vulnerable children with the educational and social development of more privileged children in the society. We submit that for social protection policies to become a truly transformative force for children in poverty, such policies should be purposively conceived in conjunction with the education and developmental imperatives of children from more privileged backgrounds.

## **Research Objectives**

The overarching objective of this research is to explore the attitudes, values and perspectives of middle class children who go through a prolonged engagement of supporting the educational and social needs of most vulnerable children of the society.

## **Literature Review**

The paper will present a theoretical overview that is informed by multiple bodies of scholarship:

- Child poverty and disparities
- Social exclusion of children

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [edelamonica@unicef.org](mailto:edelamonica@unicef.org) Regional Advisor, Social Policy, Latin America & Caribbean

<sup>2</sup> [tamo.chattopadhyay@gmail.com](mailto:tamo.chattopadhyay@gmail.com). Director – Institute for Education and Social Development, India

- Child and adolescent participation
- Agency of children; Advocacy by and for children
- Identity and aspirations of adolescents
- Peer relationship of children and adolescent
- Adolescent Social Capital
- Universality of children's rights
- Leadership and organizational culture in conceiving and sustaining policies

### **Research Context**

The site of the research is Loreto Sealdah School in the city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) - a metropolis in Eastern India with a striking level of disparities in wealth and child well-being. The school, a middle class English medium private all girls K-12 institution, broke down a major social barrier in 1979 under its visionary Principal Sister Cyril Mooney (retired since 2011) by opening its premises to young girls living in abject poverty on the streets of Kolkata. This was a bold social experiment whereby the school's "regular" students from fifth grade onwards would be required to act as "instructors" in non-formal education activities for the underprivileged children or the "Rainbows". Beginning in 1996, the school converted its terrace to a night shelter for the approximately 200 Rainbow girls from the streets, providing them with a safe and supportive environment they could call 'home.' Today, the Rainbow program is organically integrated with the regular school day. Rainbow girls receive individual and group tutoring from the Loreto students themselves, who in turn receive pedagogic support from their classroom teachers. In a society with deep historical roots of class and caste divisions and enduring cultural and social stigmas associated therewith, the notion of middle class and street children playing and studying together within an English medium private school is nothing short of an extraordinary social experiment and challenge to the status quo.

### **Methodology**

- A survey containing close-ended and open-ended questions administered to all students in grades 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10.

- The students from these grades were selected due to their mandatory participation in Rainbow activities and their ability to complete written surveys in English.

### **Findings and Analysis**

Descriptive analysis of student responses to both close-ended questions in the research instrument revealed that an overwhelming majority of students viewed the Rainbow program favorably. Qualitative analysis of student responses to open-ended questions conveyed a deep self-reflection and awareness of the privileges and opportunity structures that the Loreto students came to discern through their engagement with the Rainbow children: “I have got an idea that there are children in adverse situations who are fighting back and coping with the situation. Seeing them my own problems seem small” (9<sup>th</sup> grade). The fact that all Loreto Sealdah girls – the future female professionals of India – are growing up with a deep appreciation and empathy for the needs of the less privileged in the society is the most far-reaching impact of the social innovation manifest in the Rainbow model.

### **Policy Implications**

As elsewhere in the world, the relatively better-off children in the Indian society do not experience class-based oppression, nor may they notice the intensity of poverty all around them in the city. Often, visible human suffering is internalized and justified in the middle class ethos as an ‘unfortunate situation’ about which some abstract notion of national development is to be blamed. Against this backdrop, by providing an authentic context for participation and relationships, the Loreto Rainbow model makes the issues of oppression, human rights and everyday suffering real and relevant to those who are born into relatively privileged circumstances. This transformed awareness carries great potential for bridging the social divides in unequal societies. At the same time, the wider replication, adaptation and scalability of the Loreto Sealdah Rainbow model remains unclear.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Integrate social protection policies for children in poverty with authentic engagement opportunities for non-poor children and adolescents

- Scaffold the engagement in a developmentally appropriate discourse of children's rights
- Embed such policies in institutional contexts that are normative "sites" for children and adolescents – school, sports, culture, and so forth. The key is to move beyond the dialectic of benefactor-beneficiary, and instead champion the universality of rights and interdependencies of all members of the society
- For UNICEF audience – find conceptual intersection between the constructs of disparities, adolescent participation and social protection of children. Have this process informed by the differentiated reward and incentive structures that must be carefully aligned to bring together young people with pronounced disparities in their identities and aspirations.