

One billion children worldwide suffering deprivation

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One billion children are suffering from one or more forms of deprivation according to the latest UNICEF report.

Four hundred million children do not have access to clean water. They either have to drink surface water or walk more than 15 minutes to find a protected water source. This means that on average one in five children in developing countries are severely deprived of water. In some areas the figure is much higher. For example, in Ethiopia, Rwanda and Uganda it rises to 80 percent.

One third of the developing world's children lack sanitation. The total number is 500 million—that is, a third of children in developing countries have “no access whatever” to sanitation. This dramatically increases the risk of disease, especially intestinal worms which “sap learning ability.”

For 270 million children in developing countries there is no access to health care services. A quarter of children in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa do not receive immunisations for the six main diseases and if they succumb to diarrhoea have no access to treatment.

Shelter deprivation, which the report defines as living in dwellings with more than five people per room or no floor material, affects 640 million children.

Amongst children aged between 7-18 years, 13 percent or more than 140 million have never been to school. The rate is even higher in some areas; in sub-Saharan Africa, 32 percent of girls and 27 percent of boys never attend school. Nearly a third of all children in the developing world have no access to television, radio, newspapers or phones. In an increasingly globalised world, more and more reliant on knowledge-based technologies, this denial of education and access to information puts these children at a severe disadvantage.

The report found that 16 percent of children in the developing world were severely malnourished. Half of those affected live in South Asia. They were more vulnerable to disease and likely to suffer learning difficulties.

As debilitating as these single deprivations are, many of the children suffer more than one type of deprivation. The study reports that 700 million suffer two or more of the deprivations. These multiple deprivations have a cumulative

effect since, “disadvantages overlap and reinforce one another. A lack of sanitation pollutes the water that children use, and poor nutrition makes them vulnerable to sickness and diarrhoea—which then go untreated, further reducing their body weight and resistance to disease... A child severely deprived of shelter, living in an overcrowded home in an impoverished neighbourhood may not be able to absorb an education even if there is a school nearby.”

The impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has seriously exacerbated the insecurity of children in developing countries. Worldwide 38 million people currently are HIV infected, of which two million are children under 15. Half of all infants infected with HIV, usually passed to them in the womb, die before the age of two.

The report notes; “By 2003, 15 million children—80 percent of them in sub-Saharan Africa—had been orphaned by the disease... The pandemic has contributed to higher poverty levels, an increased incidence of child labour and dramatically shortened life spans. In Botswana, for instance, over 37 percent of adults are infected with HIV—and a child born there in 2003 could expect to live just 39 years, down from 65 years in 1990. In the most-affected countries, HIV/AIDS is eliminating the protective environment that is the right of every child and the first responsibility of adults to children.”

Children orphaned by HIV/AIDS become increasingly vulnerable. The UNICEF report refers to assessments by the International Labour Organisation: “that orphaned children are much more likely than non-orphans to be working in commercial agriculture, as street vendors, in domestic service and commercial sex. Of those children working as prostitutes in Zambia, 47 percent were found to be double orphans, while a further 24 percent were single orphans. Around 38 percent of the children working in the mines in the United Republic of Tanzania—whose ages ranged between 7 and 17 years old—were orphans. In Ethiopia, more than three quarters of the child domestic labourers interviewed in Addis Ababa were orphaned, 80 percent of them had no right to leave their jobs and many worked more

than 11 hours a day, seven days a week, with no opportunity to play, watch television or listen to the radio.”

Another major factor affecting the lives of children in the developing world is armed conflict. The report notes that between 1990 and 2003 there were 59 major armed conflicts over 48 locations. During this period 90 percent of the deaths resulting from these conflicts were civilians, of which 80 percent were women and children.

It is not just those directly involved in the conflicts that suffer. The report notes: “In a typical five-year war, the under-five mortality rate increases by 13 percent and adult mortality increases even more.” The end of conflict does not immediately relieve the situation: “Recent research has shown that during the first five-year of peace the average under-five mortality rate remains 11 percent higher than its corresponding level before the conflict.”

A separate detailed report produced by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), on the conflict occurring in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) since August 1998, illuminates a terrible example.

The IRC and Burnet Institute of Australia, collected mortality data over the period January 2003 to April 2004 and covered 19,500 households. Physicians and epidemiologists conducted the survey.

They concluded that 3.8 million people have died in the six years of the conflict and continue to die at the rate of 31,000 a month. The excess above the normal expected mortality rate was 1,000 a day or nearly half a million in total. Almost half of these have been children. It notes: “As documented by three previous IRC surveys in DR Congo, the vast majority (this time 98 percent) were killed by disease and malnutrition, by-products of a war that destroyed much of the health care system and economy.”

Dr Richard Brennan, one of the authors of the report, says: “The international response to the humanitarian crisis in Congo has been grossly inadequate in proportion to need. Our findings show that improving and maintaining security and increasing simple, proven and cost-effective interventions such as basic medical care, immunisations and clean water would save hundreds of thousands of lives in Congo. There is no shortage of evidence. It’s sustained compassion and political will that’s lacking”.

In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly set Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015. This included to reduce by half the numbers living on less than a dollar a day, cut by half those suffering hunger and reduce by two thirds the mortality rate of children under five years.

In 2002, the Assembly complemented these by setting further goals relating to the lives of children embodied in an international compact called “A World Fit for Children.”

The UNICEF report notes that progress is behind schedule for almost all these targets. International bodies such as the UN, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development all doubt that they can be met unless there is a concerted effort on the part of western governments. If these goals are not met, the UN report says, “Millions will see their childhood violated through ill health or death from preventable diseases.”

Aid is not being directed at alleviating the crisis that faces poor children in developing countries. A newly published report by the development charity Oxfam, entitled *Debt and aid—Paying the Price*, also highlights the results of the failure to meet the millennium development goals. The Oxfam report warns that “45 million more children will die between now and 2015... 97 million more children will still be out of school in 2015... 53 million more people in the world will lack proper sanitation facilities.”

It continued: “Despite the fact that HIV infection rates are rising in sub-Saharan Africa, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria is assured of only one quarter of the funds that it needs for 2005.”

It noted the increasingly politicised role of aid that is given, that “combating terrorism is now an explicit aim of official aid programmes”. It also noted how 30 percent of aid from G7 countries was tied to obligations to buy goods and services from the donor country. It was also tied to the receiving country having to carry out “reforms” usually in the form of privatisation of state sector concerns.

The increasing tensions between the major Western powers driven by the imperialist ambitions of the United States of America can only mean that aid and global trade policies become more and more determined by and reflect the interests of the major powers. There can be no coordinated global response to the needs of the vast majority of humanity.

The UNICEF report can be found at:
<http://www.unicef.org/>

The Oxfam report can be found at
http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/debt_aid/mdgs_price.htm

and the IRC report at
<http://www.theirc.org/index.cfm/wwwID/2132>



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