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Title	Lessons from recent UK experience on tackling child poverty
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Citation	教育福祉研究, 22, 1-14
Issue Date	2017-11-27
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/67820
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	01-0919-6226-22.pdf



Lessons from recent UK experience on tackling child poverty

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Introduction

The legacy that the incoming Labour government inherited in 1997 in relation to child poverty was historically and internationally dire. As an Inquiry (1995) had shown, poverty and inequality rose rapidly in the UK in the 1980s, with a range of factors (demographic, economic and policy) all moving in the same direction. Between 1979 and 1997, the number of children in poverty tripled, until in 1997/98 one in three children were living in poverty¹⁾, the highest proportion of any European country (Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001).

Two clear differences between then and now should be noted. First, a major focus of the Labour government from 1997 was workless households; but the proportion of children in poverty in working families has increased, and this is now more important for policy (DWP, 2016). Indeed, a recent report (Belfield *et al.*, 2016) has shown that further falls in worklessness have much less scope to reduce child poverty than in the past.

Secondly, Labour was also interested in social exclusion, by which it meant cumulative deprivation. But its strategy to tackle child poverty was largely a separate exercise, with different policy instruments, aimed at a much larger population. Now, however, there seems to be more overlap (and possibly some confusion) between the current Conservative government's efforts to help the most disadvantaged—which it calls 'social justice'—and its policies to tackle child poverty. As Mansour and Curran (2016) argue, there is a

significant distinction between inadequate resources to meet needs and a collection of social problems.

This chapter discusses first the main elements of policy relevant to child poverty under the three recent governments in the UK. It then suggests some lessons from recent UK experience that could be useful for other countries.

Recent experience of tackling child poverty in the UK

Labour, 1997–2010

In the lead-up to the 1997 election, there was no focus on child poverty by Labour—which in fact reduced benefits for lone parents immediately on taking office, as part of its pre-election promise to abide by Conservative spending commitments. But in 1999, the then prime minister Tony Blair (1999) set out a government goal to end child poverty by 2020. And subsequently, the Chancellor (Gordon Brown) outlined milestones along the way—reducing child poverty by a quarter by 2004/05, and by half by 2010/11. Public Service Agreements were drawn up for government departments, incorporating targets for reductions in the number of children in households on relative low income, 'absolute' (anchored) low income, and suffering a combination of material deprivation and relative low income.

The focus on child poverty became a defining theme of Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 (Waldfoegel, 2010). Policies focused on the short term (tackling child poverty in the present)

and the longer term (preventing poor children becoming poor adults). There was an emphasis on policies to raise incomes directly, including increasing child benefit, introducing new benefits in particular for younger children, and improving benefit levels for children in families out of work.

Introducing new tax credits for families with an earner was also about ‘making work pay’, as was the national minimum wage, introduced in 1999. Another key element was the promotion of paid work, with a range of ‘New Deals’, including a voluntary scheme for lone parents. And policies also addressed long-term disadvantage, especially in the early years (Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001). Child poverty in relative terms fell by 700,000 before housing costs between 1998/99 and 2004/05.

In its second and third terms, some of the impetus of Labour’s redistributive programme was lost. Relative child poverty increased by 100,000 by 2005/06. There was also increasing concern over the structure of financial support for families—whether it favoured smaller over larger families (because of additional payments in some benefits for the first child) and lone parents over couples (because of the proportionally lower benefit/tax credit rate for couples, to recognise economies of scale). Increasing activation of parents was also argued to be taking insufficient account of children (eg see Harker, 2006). And the financial crisis demanded policy attention from 2008—though benefits were maintained, and even increased in real terms, through to the change of government in 2010 and indeed beyond.

Labour’s strategy was not only focused on incomes (Waldfoegel, 2010). Spending on public services was significantly increased. It developed the first National Childcare Strategy in 2004. And the creation of a network of Sure Start programmes for children under school age, first of all in

disadvantaged neighbourhoods but open to all young children living there, was a flagship policy (Eisenstadt, 2011). Outcomes were specified, but local community partnerships had freedom to design local programmes, making Sure Start challenging to evaluate. These programmes developed and/or brought together a range of services for children, including family support, health, child care and other provision—though, once they were changed from programmes to centres and developed in all areas by local authorities as children’s centres, they tended to have a more employment-oriented remit. The free (part-time) early years education offer was made to all 4-year-olds in England in 2000, and was effectively extended to all 3-year-olds from 2005.

Towards the end of its last term of office, Labour also focused more on investment to avoid child poverty developing into adult poverty, and on breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. In addition, the Social Exclusion Taskforce began to highlight the most severely excluded (‘the bottom 2 per cent’) rather than a wider group. Both these themes would become more important after the 2010 election.

The authors of a recent report (Lupton *et al.*, 2016) concluded that child poverty had decreased under Labour, but that progress had stalled before 2007 (the study’s starting point). Labour had implemented fairly fast spending increases, but spending was still moderate compared to other countries; and overall its policies were dominated not by cash benefits but by modernisation of services, although to tackle child (and pensioner) poverty it had increased benefit levels. But Waldfoegel (2010) argued that the US could learn from the UK’s focus on improving incomes and services, rather than just increasing employment.

Labour’s policies did not change much after the crisis struck, up to the change of government

in 2010. In 2010, the ‘legacy’ Child Poverty Act was put forward by Labour, and was passed with all-party support. This set targets to reduce child poverty in terms of low income and deprivation, committed governments to develop a child poverty strategy, proposed a Child Poverty Commission to monitor government performance, and called on lower tiers of government to develop their own strategies.

Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, 2010–15

The coalition came into office with a much better social inheritance than Labour, largely due to its efforts (Lupton *et al.*, 2016). Before the 2010 election, David Cameron had stated that the Conservatives recognised and would act on relative poverty (Lister and Bennett, 2010). When the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government came to power in May, however, its economic inheritance was much worse than in 1997 (Lupton *et al.*, 2016). It immediately delivered an emergency Budget, declaring its top priority to be deficit reduction—though in a ‘fair’ way, with everyone ‘in it together’ (Lupton *et al.*, 2016). However, in practice many cuts affected social security in particular, and thus those on lower incomes.

Some policies did protect those on low incomes; so Lupton *et al.* (2016) call the approach ‘selective austerity’. For example, the coalition initially continued to protect benefits and tax credits from inflation (using a different, lower, index). And some positive new measures were implemented. The ‘pupil premium’ was introduced—an additional amount given directly to schools for each child identified as disadvantaged in various ways (spring 2011); and free school meals were introduced for all 5–7 year olds (autumn 2014). Both these policies were attributed to the Liberal Democrats. The coalition planned to extend free

early education to 20 and then 40 per cent of disadvantaged 2-year-olds and improved help for teenage parents.

But post-crisis social security cuts targeted families with children, in particular larger families. Early cuts also affected young children in particular, abolishing some additional payments introduced by Labour. The ‘benefit cap’, limiting means-tested benefits for workless households, is not adjusted for the number of children. Additions to means-tested benefits for low-income families are in future restricted to the first two children (with limited exceptions).

The UK’s minimum income scheme has also been undermined by a range of other restrictions. Local authorities were given ‘discretionary housing payments’ by government to ease the impact of certain cuts; but this only compensates partially. And benefits have become more targeted as well as more conditional.

One major structural reform is the introduction of ‘universal’ credit (UC)²⁾, replacing six means-tested benefits/tax credits and paid to people in or out of work. (‘Universal’ here means comprehensive, not non-means-tested.) Its aims are to simplify benefits and provide clearer incentives (aided by conditionality) to enter work and progress. But this has been cut as well. And implementation has been delayed several times, with full roll-out now planned for 2022. A key aim for universal credit is to support progress towards ‘self-sufficiency’.

The coalition government did set a target on persistent child poverty in 2014, to add to those already in the Child Poverty Act 2010. And after consultation (HM Government, 2014a), it published a Child Poverty Strategy 2014–17 (HM Government, 2014b) to replace the 2011 strategy, arguing for action on child poverty to go beyond what it called the ‘poverty plus a pound’ approach

of the Labour government. So tackling poverty at its source and ‘breaking the cycle of disadvantage’ were core themes. Reducing costs for families was another focus for action. There was some recognition in the strategy that in-work poverty was a problem.

The coalition saw the ‘Troubled Families’ programme, set up in 2011 to work intensively with a small number of families with multiple problems (120,000 and then a further 400,000), as an important element of its approach. In addition, it introduced a transferable tax allowance for basic rate taxpaying couples with children with one partner at home looking after children, and a ‘family test’ through which departments were meant to test their policies against criteria for furthering family stability.

In terms of outcomes, 2010–15 saw a remarkable rise in employment; workless households decreased, with children in such households falling by 450,000 since 2010³). Labour market changes had an important influence on living standards. But analysis of tax/benefit policies from 2010 to 2015 showed children and those in their 30s and early 40s were hit hardest (ISER, 2016). And child poverty in families with an earner (‘in work poverty’) did not improve. The ‘poverty gap’ (how far incomes fall below the poverty threshold on average) increased for families with children before and after housing costs between 2007/08 and 2013/14⁴). Several children’s organisations showed how early intervention funding for children’s and young people’s services had been cut by some 70 per cent between 2010/11 and 2015/16⁵). The Troubled Families programme has had no discernible effect on unemployment, truancy or criminality, according to a report unpublished at the time of writing, but leaked to the press⁶).

Conservative government, from 2015*

Since May 2015, there has been a Conservative government (with a change of prime minister in July 2016, following the referendum on European Union membership on 23 June). The then prime minister in January 2016 promised ‘an all-out assault on poverty’⁷). But the 2015 Conservative manifesto had also promised £12 billion of cuts in annual social security spending and the government set about implementing this—though opposition meant some cuts to tax credits were not put into effect. Freezing most benefit levels for four years brings the biggest savings and affects many families with children. The Secretary of State resigned in March 2016, citing ‘salami-slicing’ of benefits as one of the reasons for this.

The prime minister’s speech in January 2016 emphasised the Conservatives’ concern about a focus on ‘welfare’ and the dependency it might bring. Giving the example of the inability of state ‘welfare’ or the free market to transform the life of an alcoholic single parent on a poor estate who had been sexually abused as a child, he emphasised the need to focus on causes rather than symptoms and on poverty as a social issue.

The government went on to outline its goal of a ‘high wage, low tax, low welfare’ economy. As an important step towards this, it introduced the ‘National Living Wage’ from April 2016—in practice a higher minimum wage for those aged 25 or over, aiming to reach 60% of the median wage by 2020. In addition, it continued the coalition government’s real increases in the personal tax allowance, giving more tax-free income to every

* In June 2017, there was a general election in the UK and the Conservatives were returned again as the largest party, but without a majority. They made an agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party in order to get their support. (Note from author, November 2017).

taxpayer and taking more low-paid people out of income tax. And it was cutting the value of benefits and tax credits.

In July 2015, the government changed the Child Poverty Act to the Life Chances Act. This meant abandoning targets to reduce the proportions of children in households on low income and in material deprivation. It would have resulted in these measures being abandoned too (Bennett, 2015a), without the opposition from the House of Lords which meant that they were reinstated. Worklessness and educational attainment will be tracked by statute, with other non-statutory indicators of life chances added. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC) became the Social Mobility Commission. But Scotland is working on its own Child Poverty Bill.

For some time, commentators had been predicting that the targets for reducing child poverty would not be met (eg see Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015). But as the Commission said (p. ix): ‘Abolishing the legal targets does not make the issue of child poverty go away. It remains a deep scar in the fabric of our nation. The issue is less how child poverty is measured and more how it is tackled.’

The Institute for Fiscal Studies projects an increase in ‘absolute’ poverty amongst children, from 15.1% in 2015–16 to 18.3% in 2020–21, driven entirely by a sharp rise in poverty among families with three or more children resulting from planned cuts. Relative child poverty is also projected to rise significantly, from some 17.8% in 2015–16 to 25.7% in 2020–21, undoing most of the falls since 1997–98 (Browne and Hood, 2016). And Lupton *et al.* (2016) show that far from reducing the deficit, cuts in benefits and tax credits have virtually completely been offset by cuts in direct taxation, benefiting the top half of the population disproportionately.

Lessons from recent UK experience

Analysis, definitions and measures of child poverty

Lister (2004) suggests that it is problematic to confuse concepts, definitions and measures of poverty; and that to criticise a measure of poverty because it does not encompass all the dimensions contained within the concept of poverty is not very useful. This valuable advice has not always been adhered to in recent debates about child poverty measures in the UK.

The definition and measurement, as well as the causes, of child poverty have in fact been almost constant topics of debate over the past two decades. This has resulted in improvements in the accuracy and acceptability of the central measures of child poverty. But the discussion has in practice often been a proxy for continuing controversy over the causes of child poverty and the necessary policies to solve it.

This is in part an argument about the purpose of a measure. What some would see as the key identifying feature of child poverty (insufficient resources to be able to participate in the society you live in), which should be measured in part in order to assess the impact of policies (and other factors) on its volume and depth, is seen by others as only a symptom of child poverty. Instead, they would want to define poverty by its causes in order to direct policies at those causes.

The Labour government undertook a consultation on measures of child poverty in 2003 (although similar exercises were not undertaken in relation to other groups). This was necessary in order to measure progress towards the target of ending child poverty by 2020. This exercise resulted in the longer term in the mix of relative and anchored low income, and material deprivation, adopted to assess outcomes under the Child

Poverty Act 2010.

Labour did publish a set of much wider indicators, called *Opportunity for All*, although these were discontinued. They were not measuring multi-dimensional poverty at the individual level but measuring the existence of various manifestations of disadvantage in the country.

The crisis from 2008 did reveal the shortcomings of a relative income measure in the short term. As median income fell, poverty flat-lined. This allowed a critique to develop of income itself as a measure of (child) poverty, and in particular of relative income. In fact, other measures were available to complement the relative income measure—in particular, material deprivation and also ‘anchored’ or ‘absolute’ low income—and most informed commentators agreed that in the longer term lack of material resources seen in a relative perspective is the most sensible way to think about poverty. In addition, the current central measure, of under 60 per cent of median equivalised disposable household income before housing costs, is also (together with material deprivation) the internationally comparable measure in the European Union (Mansour and Curran, 2016). But this did not prevent the relative low income measure being held up to ridicule by some, in part because of the impact of the recession but in part also because if median income is increased for certain groups (eg pensioners, taxpayers etc.) those in poverty can appear worse off⁽⁸⁾.

In addition, whilst Piachaud and Sutherland (2001) could state unequivocally that ‘ending child poverty requires an adequate minimum income’, the Centre for Social Justice argued that low income was merely a symptom of poverty and that a poverty measure should focus on the causes, which it identified as family breakdown, worklessness, educational failure, drug and alcohol addiction, and problem debt (eg in Social Justice Policy

Group, 2006).

In 2012/13, the coalition government consulted again on measuring child poverty. It wanted to move towards a multi-dimensional measure, and in particular to downgrade income as part of that—despite the important review of the evidence by Cooper and Stewart (2013), showing that money did matter for children’s outcomes. Bennett (2008) and others, in a book for Save the Children, also reported that when families were given more money under Labour they had spent it on better food and other things to improve their children’s lives.

Stewart and Roberts (2016) analysed the responses to the consultation, and found that virtually all wanted to retain income as part of the measure. Moreover, although the coalition government continued to cite family breakdown and the other four factors cited above as the main ‘root causes of’ or ‘pathways into’ poverty, the Child Poverty Strategy 2014–17 clarified that low income from earnings or resulting from the absence of work was a key cause of poverty, and cited a partially different five key factors associated with child poverty: long-term worklessness, having low qualifications, raising children on your own, having three or more children to care for, and experiencing ill health. (Even here, however, it can be argued that these factors would not always lead to child poverty if policy successfully addressed the risks they pose.)

Policy priorities

Key policy lessons from the past twenty years include ensuring that a mix of policies is used to address child poverty. For example, under Labour a national minimum wage was introduced, increasing earnings; but there were also increases in child benefit and in means-tested benefits for children. The incoming coalition government in

2010 criticised Labour governments for having focused on ‘poverty plus a pound’, in that they had concentrated on raising cash incomes. In addition, it was argued by Conservatives in particular that Labour had focused its energies on pushing those people just below the poverty line just over it—although evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that this was not in fact the case, but that those well below the poverty line had also benefited.

And addressing educational attainment and child care, as well as policies for disadvantaged neighbourhoods, meant that Labour’s focus was not only on income (whatever the critics said). But, even though Labour had a multidimensional understanding of child poverty and range of policies, its main targets were measured in terms of income and material deprivation; so it was judged on those alone. And of course, as the authors of another study of parenting practices emphasised recently (Richards *et al.* 2016), income levels are crucial. These authors were surprised that commentators on their report did not acknowledge this, and so published a detailed rebuttal about this (Centre for Social Investigation, 2016).

Over the past twenty years, there has been an increasingly strong emphasis on early intervention. However, this has been interpreted in two ways. One is a focus on the early years, and in particular on parenting and pre-school education. The other is an emphasis on preventative interventions, before serious consequences develop. The approach has been shared across parties and governments, with a publication in 2008 written by two politicians from different parties (Allen and Duncan Smith), and two Labour politicians (Allen again, and Frank Field MP) (Field, 2010) being asked to write reports by the coalition government. The Early Intervention Foundation

was set up with start-up funding and became an independent charity, merging the two foci by working on early intervention for 0–19 year olds.

There has, however, been some conflict between this priority and the actions of the coalition government in particular. Its post-crisis cuts (as noted above) hit families with young children hard. And the reductions in funding for local authority and other services have made it harder for practitioners to put resources into more preventative work rather than crisis situations. For example, many Sure Start/children’s centres have closed (Lupton *et al.*, 2016) and others have shifted their focus to deal only with families needing social work help.

Governance

In the Labour years, in part because of the then Chancellor’s (Gordon Brown’s) drive to tackle child poverty, the Treasury became a key player in anti-poverty policy. This seems unusual both in the UK and internationally. It could be argued that having the Treasury ‘on side’ was essential to have an effective cross-governmental approach to child poverty—rather than the Treasury trying to limit public spending on policies to achieve this. However, this approach does not seem to have lasted beyond the end of the last Labour government in 2010; and the crisis also meant that the Treasury resumed its former more traditional role (as noted bitterly by Duncan Smith in his resignation note). In addition, it could be said that the Treasury’s central role resulted in a more economic approach towards child poverty that was less likely to engage the emotions—although Brown himself described child poverty as ‘a scar on the nation’s soul’ (1999).

Labour also set up a Child Poverty Unit, sponsored by several government departments, including the Treasury, to drive cross-departmen-

tal action. The siting of such a unit is important, however, in signalling its status relative to other organs of government.

The coalition government set up a Commission, to 'hold the government's feet to the fire' over its performance on child poverty—but extended this to include social mobility; its remit was to publish regular reports, advise ministers when requested, and act as an advocate for social mobility outside government. This body has now become the Social Mobility Commission, however, with the child poverty element of its remit abandoned. It has recently published social mobility indicators (ODPM, 2015) and the Social Mobility Index (2016), showing where children grow up with the best and worst life chances. Mansour and Curran (2016) argue for an independent policy analysis unit to manage rollout and implementation of measures to meet the child poverty target.

The UK's policy structure is largely centralised. The Child Poverty Act 2010 did require sub-national governance levels to develop their own strategies; and Mansour and Curran (2016) rightly argue that partnership is crucial. Several of the policy instruments to tackle child poverty were devolved to the governments of the smaller nations of the UK (Wales and Scotland in particular) following the devolution settlement negotiated by Labour (Simpson, forthcoming). Moreover, the coalition government has followed an agenda of 'localisation', decentralising some policy areas to local government, including the devolved administrations. However, the bulk of the legislation on both taxation and income redistribution via benefits/tax credits and the national minimum wage remains at Westminster level with the central government. This chapter focuses on the UK-wide government. But it is worth noting that increased devolution creates more space for 'natural experiments', with the smaller nations in-

creasingly deciding to do things differently on child poverty, in particular when it comes to mitigating the impact of social security cuts.

Public support

Most importantly, perhaps, the events of the past two decades have demonstrated that, in order to maintain long-term political commitment to tackling child poverty, it is crucial to have broad public support. This has not been forthcoming in sufficient strength to maintain a coherent priority on tackling child poverty over other policy imperatives.

Governments have arguably not devoted enough attention to the complex and difficult issues raised by public attitudes towards poverty (e.g. see Pantazis, 2016, and other articles in that special issue). These include shame, fear, disgust, difference and mistrust, according to Unwin (2013). In the UK at least, such attitudes have largely become more negative over this time—though more recent reports (such as the latest British Social Attitudes survey) show increased support for higher spending on benefits for some groups—albeit still not for jobless people without children⁹.

At first, Labour believed that focusing on child poverty might be enough to persuade the public that significant action was urgently needed. In a speech, the then prime minister, Tony Blair (1999) committed the government to ending child poverty within a generation. Gordon Brown, to be prime minister after Blair, described children as 20 per cent of the population but 100 per cent of the future (cited in Blair, 1999).

Children could not be blamed for their poverty, and so Labour could potentially overcome longstanding negative feelings about the 'undeserving poor'. However, although Labour more than doubled the allowances for children in workless

families aged under 11 in real terms, it nonetheless did not boast about this ‘quiet redistribution’ or ‘redistribution by stealth’ (eg see Hattersley, 2005), apparently for fear of provoking such negative reactions.

Indeed, it could be argued that Labour went further, and that Blair in particular ‘wooded’ the electorate rather than ‘leading’ it, as Lister (2001) described it—or encouraged public opprobrium towards certain groups of benefit claimants in particular. Ministers talked of helping ‘decent hardworking families’ through tax credits, associating additional income with effort and tax rather than with benefits. Labour would have argued that these kinds of associations were necessary to give it permission to redistribute resources, including to families with children who were workless (Bennett, 1999). But there is a clear danger here. In addition, although Brown in effect invited greater public pressure, to give him a good reason to act on child poverty, drawing a parallel with public calls for action to help indebted nations in the global south, it is likely that the complex relationship people have with poverty in their own country precludes this kind of mass action on child poverty in the UK.

Child poverty and gender

Last but not least, are the connections between child poverty and gender issues. The Women’s Budget Group (WBG, 2005) has argued that the well-being of children cannot be divorced from that of their mothers. Indeed, if money is not sufficient to go round, most parents—mothers in particular—will compromise their own well-being to meet the needs of their children (e.g. see Bennett, 2008). Mothers often act as the ‘shock absorbers’ of family poverty, as Lister has argued (in WBG, 2005), incurring both material and psychological costs. Poor health and low morale

can in turn make it more difficult to seek and find employment. Tackling the connections between gender and poverty is therefore not only important in its own right (Bennett and Daly, 2014) but also crucial to the success of any child poverty strategy.

The stress of poverty, as the Women’s Budget Group argued—and the Centre for Social Investigation (2016) has confirmed—can make good parenting much more difficult. But unfortunately, because mothers are often the ‘lead carer’ and take more responsibility for children, including as lone parents, they are often blamed when things go wrong, even sometimes being punished for the misbehaviour of their children, for example. And even when government strategy addresses ‘parents’, this can in practice mean mothers.

The Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 implemented various child poverty measures that had an impact on women, and on mothers in particular. The new tax credits from 2003, by separating payments for children from those related to work, largely put more money in the hands of main carers, usually women. The New Deal for Lone Parents contributed to an increased employment rate for lone parents (Bennett and Daly, 2014) that in many cases also resulted in decreased poverty. Sure Start centres provided more support for many parents, especially mothers, caring for children at home, and several new rights and benefits were directed at pregnant women and mothers of young children. And equality legislation, catalysed by the European Union but supported by Labour, also created a comprehensive framework against discrimination, including obligations to do equality impact assessments of proposed reforms (an obligation subsequently rescinded by Cameron as prime minister)¹⁰.

However, the links between child poverty

and gender issues—in particular, the gendered division of labour and the under-valuation of work, whether paid or unpaid, traditionally carried out by women—were not fully recognised or acted upon by Labour. And sometimes the actions which it did take could be seen as instrumental—in the sense that policies which advantaged women were enacted for other reasons, including tackling child poverty.

However, the coalition and Conservative governments have had a much less positive impact on gender equality and on those aspects of gender relations that are related to child poverty. As noted above, Cameron suggested that equality impact assessments were not necessary; he criticised them as ‘tick box’ exercises and implied that clever civil servants did not need them. The cuts implemented by the coalition and Conservative governments have hit women’s pockets much more heavily than men’s (see Bennett, 2015b). In addition, as women often manage the household budget in low-income families, they may absorb the costs of benefit cuts disproportionately, whoever is the recipient affected in the family. The Fawcett Society described a ‘triple jeopardy’ for women, with their incomes comprising more from benefits, their interaction with public services being more intense, and their representation in public sector jobs being greater. All these areas have been subject to significant reductions. And, as the Women’s Budget Group has argued, although tax cuts have taken many low-paid women out of income tax, once they are no longer paying tax any further steps benefit those higher up the income scale and not them.

The increase in dual-earner couples has raised median incomes in many western countries, including the UK, making it more difficult for one-earner families with children to escape poverty. A parent moving into work may be more

likely to take children out of poverty in lone-parent than in two-parent families (Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001). But arguably no UK government has yet done enough to enable ‘second earners’ in two-parent families to enter paid employment and to ‘make work pay’ when they do. And the latest reform, universal credit, is tilted against the entry of ‘second earners’ into employment by worsening disincentives compared to the situation under tax credits. Any strategy which relies on paid work to tackle (child) poverty must therefore be explicitly gendered (WBG, 2005).

And any child poverty strategy must also tackle the long-term issue of the inadequacy of adult benefit rates. In the UK, there is also particular concern about the incomes of young single mothers-to-be, as well as asylum seekers and those affected by benefit sanctions. The key lesson here is that children’s poverty cannot be separated from that of their parents.

Conclusion

The sections above concern analysis, specific policy positions or practical implementation. However, there are several important but more general messages arising out of the experience of the past twenty years in the UK.

First, child poverty should not be confused with social exclusion, or the problems of a small group of ‘troubled families’. One of the worst examples here is that sometimes an image of the brain of a child who has been severely neglected has been used to illustrate the wider problem of child poverty. The issue of child poverty is structural and much larger than that.

Secondly, neither should child poverty be confused with social mobility. In the 1980s in the UK, some commentators argued that the choice to have children was in essence the same as choosing an expensive consumption good, and there

was no more of a case for helping parents with the cost of bringing them up. The idea of children as private possessions of their parents has now changed. But, as Lister has argued, seeing children only as 'human becomings' rather than also as human beings in the here and now—with human rights—is to devalue them. To see them merely as the citizen workers of tomorrow (as may be the case with some 'social investment' perspectives, and an over-emphasis on educational attainment) is also damaging. Of course living in poverty as a child today should not mean that you are destined to live in poverty as an adult in the future. But it is also crucial to tackle your poverty today—and this will be the best foundation to ensure you do not live in poverty in the future, in part because of the kind of society that will be created if this is a political priority. The intergenerational cycle of poverty does exist; but many of the negative effects of living in poverty as a teenager on future life chances are a consequences of other characteristics of disadvantage (Blanden and Gibbons, 2006).

Thirdly, instead of seeing education as about attainment only, it should be seen as an inherent part of creating a cohesive society. The pupil premium, given to schools to help poorer pupils, is a radical new policy; but children may struggle to take advantage of the opportunities created if their basic needs are not being met because of cuts in their living standards at home. Inclusive education does not just refer to ensuring that children with special needs are fully part of the experience; the same applies to children in poverty. Similarly, pre-school childcare provision and early education should not be seen as only a means of ensuring 'school readiness' for children from disadvantaged homes, or a way to help their parents enter the workplace, but also a key measure to create an inclusive society, with

children from all backgrounds interacting and receiving similar high quality provision. In addition, this involves the inclusion of people living in poverty amongst those shaping policies. Resources for regular dialogue between the government and people with experience of poverty and groups representing them were stopped under the coalition.

Fourthly, and related to this, a child poverty strategy must be set within a broader agenda to uncover and deal with wider inequalities, in order to avoid residualisation. A universal basis of entitlement on which to build more targeted policies is crucial (Mansour and Curran, 2016). Lasting inroads into child poverty will not be made unless structural inequalities are tackled at source (Harker, 2006), including in particular those of gender, discussed above.

Fifthly, a sustainable strategy requires political leadership—and pride in successful child poverty reduction. The UK's child poverty targets and timeline kept the issue in the public eye, and enshrining them in law was key. Its approach to child poverty also made a tangible difference (Mansour and Curran, 2016). Awareness of this is crucial, to combat any sense of fatalism about poverty, as the Fabian Commission (2006) discovered. This requires clear communication. But it could be argued that communication also needs to connect with emotions more, and that negative public attitudes need to be tackled head on.

A final overarching message is that child poverty reduction must be mainstreamed. It cannot be hived off as a separate policy strand but should be incorporated as a priority in every area of government policy, including (for example) culture, transport and economic policy. This may be more likely to be achieved as part of a broader strategy to create a fairer future for all.

Notes

- 1) Measured at the time as living in households on below half mean equivalised household disposable income after housing costs
- 2) <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>
- 3) House of Commons *Hansard*, Oral Answers 11 July 2016, col. 12
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Editorial note

This is the original version of Chapter 4 in Matsumoto et al. (2017) KODOMONO HINKON WO TOINAOSU-KAZOKU GENDER NO SHITEN KARA (in English: 'Examining child poverty from a family and a gender perspective'), KYOTO: Horitsubunkasya Publishing. This was written for the book and was accepted in August 2016. Some minor revisions were made in September 2017 after publication of the book.

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