CAN MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY CAPTURE CHILD VULNERABILITY?

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The conceptual understanding and measurement of child wellbeing and/or poverty in economically developed regions has undergone significant evolution over the last decade. Led by greater awareness on the importance of childhood and psychosocial factors in adult outcomes, this evolution has meant shifting away from one-dimensional measures of poverty towards multidimensional ones. It has also meant shifting away from household or community-centred ‘input’ and ‘process’ type indicators (such as information on income-consumption, housing, sanitation or use of health and education services) towards individually-centred ‘outcome’ type indicators (such as nutrition, learning achievement, behavioural and subjective well-being measures). A new generation of statistical surveys and questionnaires with wider use of such indicators have facilitated and inspired this shift; enabling researchers to create composite indices which mirror children’s vulnerability and complex developmental needs.

This paper attempts to make some inroads into exploring child vulnerability in developing countries. It is aimed at facilitating the development of more comprehensive policy responses (e.g. social protection, compared to sector-specific responses), which focus more on vulnerable children who tend to be exposed to multiple deprivations. We make a distinction between indicators which capture child deprivation directly (i.e. show evidence on vulnerability) and those which are informative on children’s environment (household/ community) and could be considered as (an indirect) indicators of poverty risk. Taking advantage of a database created originally for 36 countries which participated in the first wave of UNICEF’s Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities, we empirically investigate whether shifting the focus away from households towards individual children might yield a more intuitive poverty measure for children than either only household-based variables or a mix of individual and household indicators.