This is what we think.

Young people experiencing poverty talk about their lives.
“What Do You Think?” wants to give a voice to vulnerable children.

Through its “What Do You Think?” project, UNICEF Belgium wants to promote the active participation of the most vulnerable children and young people so that they can express their views, be understood and above all so that they can be taken seriously in all matters that affect them.

In 1999, UNICEF Belgium launched this initiative aimed at allowing the voices of the most vulnerable children and young people to be heard at the highest level and ensure that they can make themselves heard by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the United Nations organisation which monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child).


The more vulnerable children are, the less they can participate. As a result of being seen as victims, disabled, foreigners, mentally unstable, sick or even juvenile delinquents, some children who live in harsh circumstances end up thinking that everything is predetermined and they have neither the choice nor the ability to act.

Participation is a powerful lever, not only in overcoming these negative perceptions but also in giving these children the necessary time and perspective to think and then act. The most vulnerable children and young people can play an important role in society. They are not passive victims or the source of problems, but individuals in their own right who, at their level, are willing and able to help shape society.

Fighting child poverty and social inequality is central to the work of UNICEF. Encouraged by the Belgian government’s commitment to halve child poverty and by the Belgian Presidency of the European Union which has made child poverty one of its priorities, UNICEF Belgium commissioned the research centre Kind en Samenleven to initiate a participatory consultation involving over one hundred young people experiencing poverty. This initial research aims to understand the experiences of young people affected by poverty as well as its impact on their lives.

We hope that this report can be used by policy makers, child right and poverty organisations in their combat against child poverty and social exclusion.

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With the support of the FPS Social Integration, Fight against Poverty and Social Economy and the French Community.
Setting the stage
The number of children living in poverty in Belgium has increased in recent years. Latest figures indicate that 17% of children live at risk of poverty. Encouraged by the Belgian government’s commitment to halve child poverty and by the Belgian Presidency of the European Union which has made child poverty one of its priorities, UNICEF Belgium commissioned Kind en Samenleving to initiate a consultation project involving over one hundred young people experiencing poverty.

This initial research aims to understand the experiences of young people affected by poverty as well as its impact on their lives.

Surprisingly, despite the growth in the number of children considered as living in poverty in Belgium, there has been relatively little research on the real-life experiences of children and young people affected by poverty or the impact of poverty on children.

“This is what we think. Young people experiencing poverty talk about their lives” looks at the real-life experiences of young people affected by poverty and shows some of the effects of poverty and social exclusion from a teenage perspective. It reports on how young people think and live and on the effects of poverty on their lives.

“This is what we think. Young people experiencing poverty talk about their lives” aims to raise awareness among policymakers and the general public about the daily effects of poverty and social exclusion on children and young people, to promote a change in policy to improve the life of today’s children and young people, and to ensure that children and young people are regarded as important partners in fighting child poverty and social exclusion. This report confirms that children and young people want to be involved in the decisions that affect them and can make a significant contribution.

This report, summarised here, outlines the context, methodology and results of the consultation with young people, with the final chapter considering the benefits of children’s participation and a child rights-based approach to combating child poverty together with recommendations.
THE VOICE OF YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY

This report is based on the research undertaken by Kind en Samenleving, commissioned by UNICEF Belgium. The full report bundles the expressions of more than one hundred participants and is available in French or Dutch in hardcopy or online on www.unicef.be

METHODOLOGY

Over 110 children aged 11-18 participated in this research. The youngsters were reached through their local organisations, spread over different regions (both Flemish and French speaking) in Belgium. There was a gender balance between boys and girls, and the majority of the young people have a migrant background. The selection was induced by the collaboration with poverty organisations.

The key element has been the collaboration with existing groups, as they already have a relation of trust with the youngsters and that the methodologies could be tailored. The different groups have been using different techniques; as they all had their own timing and dynamics. Both group work and one to one interviews were done, depending on what fit best with the children involved. The methods used were intended to empower the children and young people, as well as their organisations. Children were not asked to discuss ‘their poverty’, but they discussed their feelings about their living environment and their life in general.

The researchers involved followed closely the activities and discussions within each group. The meetings took place in the young people’s own meeting place, to make sure they felt at ease.

The consultations across Belgium resulted in seven areas which were considered as most important to the children and young people. These include their family, their friends, education, leisure activities, their neighbourhood, their future, and poverty.

Several general conclusions can be drawn from the consultations with children. They attach high importance to their autonomy and at the same time consider it very important to be supported by adults, in particular the educational system and their families. They feel that they do not gain sufficient support in these areas and are not involved in decisions affecting them.

The ‘road’ to realise autonomy and self-esteem for children and young people is driven by interaction with their environment, including support from their family, their friends, child and youth participation activities, education and external influences.

CONCLUSIONS

What can we learn from this initial research?

The first element to remember is that it is good to let young people express themselves and that it is a challenge to listen to them. This exercise provided a wealth of information about the opinions and experiences of around one hundred young people affected by poverty in Belgium. We cannot say these opinions and experiences are representative of all young people experiencing poverty, but they are the first step in making the voices of children and young people heard in policies aimed at fighting child poverty and social exclusion.

The real-life experiences of young people and the priorities that they identified in this report suggest that certain measures more focused on the child could be effectively implemented alongside traditional poverty indicators related to household income and the parents’ employment status. The young people pointed out the importance of leisure activities and social relationships in helping them feel good.

Their feeling of exclusion and the difficulties that they experience in participating, having sufficient information and being supported are central to this report. For example, the young people recognized how important it is for their future to achieve good results at school but many still doubt that they will be able to access college or university education.
These opinions and experiences suggest a number of measures that could be implemented to provide greater support. Some young people dream of a future with a family, children and a job, while others prefer to live one day at a time, not daring to look too far ahead. Frustrations due to the effects of poverty may lead to tensions within the family, among friends or at school. Limited access to education and training is a recurring problem for the young people questioned.

The messages from young people experiencing poverty put forward a number of important points:

1. Young people are willing and able to be involved in the issues that affect them. Their enthusiasm, the wealth of ideas and their expertise confirmed that young people who want to, should always be involved in the issues that directly affect them. The research considered them as partners as a whole and not only as object of research.

2. Children and young people have a great deal of respect and loyalty for their family. They have a great deal of appreciation for their parents who support and raise them. They are also aware of the frustrations and constraints experienced by their parents, as well as the negative effect of poverty on their family relationships and well-being. The support of families and parents must therefore be a key element in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

3. Friends are important for feeling good. The majority of young people interviewed have very strong friendships and enjoy meeting up to have fun. Most friends come from the same neighbourhood. A certain number spoke about negative peer pressure which can sometimes lead to juvenile delinquency, alcohol abuse and drug use. Local organisations are an important place for them. Young people feel at home and free there and can meet their friends without parent supervision and find a refuge from stress.

4. Education is very important to young people. They see good qualifications as a key to a better future. Education prepares them for life in the future and can help them to acquire the necessary skills and qualifications to get a good job and become independent. Young people spoke a lot about their school experiences, about a lack of information, option choices that often don’t correspond with their expectations, lack of support from teachers and bullying at school.

5. The neighbourhood is an important place in young people’s lives: this is their domain, the place where they feel “at home”. Outside its boundaries, they no longer feel comfortable. They know its problems and feel bad about the negative image that it may portray (and eventually reflect on them). Nevertheless, it is part of their social environment and they have many ideas about how to improve it and want to participate in local life. Finally, the majority suggest a lack of participation by young people locally.

6. Leisure activities are important for feeling good. But most young people do not have a lot of time. Certain activities are particularly important for some young people: music (rap music for example) is a good way for them to express themselves and forget their problems. Informal sport is preferred to practicing sport as part of a club and likewise, the majority of young people do not seem to get involved in youth movements such as the scouts. Most of them spend a lot of free time at home (TV, Internet). Some have a student job to earn a bit of money. A great part of them deplore the costs and inflexibility of public transportation.

7. Young people experiencing poverty do not think of themselves as poor. They feel excluded, due to negative images society has. For the young people interviewed, poverty exists in Africa or other developing countries. In our countries, young people associate precariousness with tramps, but do not consider themselves as “poor”. The stigmatisation and exclusion that young people refer to many times in this report confirms the close attention needed in the fight against discrimination, along with support for youth participation in local organisations working with socially vulnerable children and young people, as well as the implementation of inclusive strategies at school and in leisure activities. The effect of poverty on the well-being of young people, specifically on their self-esteem, was
largely illustrated by the young people themselves. This lack of self-confidence continues to act as a barrier to them taking control of their lives and escaping poverty. Although some have a clear vision of their future (work, family, money), most realize how difficult it is to continue studying, to be ambitious or to have dreams. We draw the attention to this, as it shows this lack of self confidence of the young people has to be addressed on several fronts. It can not go without listening and respecting their opinions and ideas.

8. **In order to fully participate these youngsters need the support of their family, friends, youth workers and teachers.** This is not help given to a victim, but support provided to a young person, who is an active participant in his own life.

Finally, young people are concerned about their family and neighbourhood. Young people are ready to participate and it is important to listen to them. **They are not the source of the problems, but are part of the resources needed to resolve them.**

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**The participation of children and young people experiencing poverty. Lessons from the practice.**

How do we talk to children and young people experiencing poverty? How can we understand the experiences of their daily lives? How can we genuinely and respectfully support the participation of children and young people experiencing poverty?

The King Baudouin Foundation and UNICEF Belgium have published a manual of methodologies that can be used as a inspiration for all those wanting to conduct participation projects or participative research with children and young people experiencing poverty.

This manual is available in hardcopy on request or online on the King Baudouin Foundation (www.kbs-frb.be) and UNICEF Belgium (www.unicef.be) websites.
RECOMMENDATIONS OF UNICEF BELGIUM

Based on the real-life experiences of young people and UNICEF’s experience, UNICEF Belgium has formulated several practical recommendations on different levels.

UNICEF Belgium calls on to:

➢ The implementation of a firm, consistent and coordinated policy which stems from a child rights-based approach.

The real-life experience of young people shows that poverty is much more than a question of income. This indicates clearly that tackling child poverty calls for coordinated measures on numerous fronts (taxation, family allowances, housing, employment, education, inclusion and equal opportunities, etc.) requiring a firm and comprehensive policy, supported by measures across all areas of life affected by poverty. These measures must be monitored and assessed according to indicators which consider the material and non-material aspects of the well-being of children and reflect the different stages of a child’s development. In other words, UNICEF Belgium is advocating a child rights-based approach.

➢ A greater recognition of the added value of the participation of vulnerable children and measures to encourage it.

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child highlights the child’s role as a participant in the promotion, protection and monitoring of its own rights. So-called vulnerable young people must be supported so they can be involved in the decisions that affect them. To do so, there needs to be much more support and information which is accessible and appropriate to young people’s requirements, but also accessible to parents, teachers and front line professionals. Organisations working with socially vulnerable young people have a vital role to play and must be supported structurally, because mainstream participation structures do not seem to succeed in creating the necessary basic conditions to involve these young people. A practical domain to start with could be the development of the neighbourhood, given the involvement of young people at this level.

➢ A greater understanding of the realities of poverty.

Young people report that they experience a great deal of misunderstanding and prejudice in their neighbourhood, at school, at organised leisure activities or when they are looking for a student job. UNICEF Belgium is launching an appeal in order to raise awareness among the general public, policy makers, the media and front line professionals of the reality for people living in poverty and that of their children.

➢ An increased attention to the family.

Children cannot be considered separately from their family. Consequently, the fight against child poverty must still be integrated within measures relating to the parents. There should be sought for the child to grow up in the best possible circumstances in his family. To do so, children and parents must be able to take advantage of necessary resources needed to create dignified living conditions and to call upon parenting support. This means a policy that encompasses the multiple aspects of living conditions, housing, employment, support for families, respect for human dignity and a spirit of cooperation and concertation.

➢ Ensure that education is a lever for all.

UNICEF Belgium is calling for the removal of all barriers – information, financial, cultural and others – and for education to undergo a fundamental restructuring in order to strengthen the school’s role of lever, rather than reinforcing social inequalities.

Education should be more accessible for all, and the value of technical and vocational programmes must be enhanced so that they are not perceived as ‘secondary’ or inferior subjects. Children must be able to develop at school and build their self-esteem, which they can then rely on in their present and future lives. Since educational inequalities already arise at a very early age, UNICEF
Belgium advocates that all children have access to qualitative basic services, care and education from an early age on.

➢ Facilitate the participation of vulnerable children in leisure initiatives.
We must break down the barriers (financial, logistical, psychological, physical, etc.) and guarantee all age groups the opportunity to practice sport, to play in their neighbourhoods and to take part in recreation projects (sporting, creative...).

Recommendations of the Committee for the Rights of the Child
Sixteen recommendations by the Committee for the Rights of the Child (addressed to Belgium in June 2010) focus on child poverty.

The Committee is concerned about the limited budget allocated to social expenditure in comparison with other OECD countries and the increase in child poverty in a rich country such as Belgium. Among the recommendations are:

- The urgent creation of early childhood education places (day-care, pre-school) accessible to all children (CO 45);
- Urgent measures ensuring access to health services for all children, especially from a financial perspective (CO 57);
- Ensuring equal access to education regardless of a child’s social-economic status (CO 67);
- Putting an end to educational inequality (CO 67);
- Adopting a comprehensive approach to combating poverty which involves the most vulnerable groups (single-parent families, foreign children) (CO 65).

Read more on http://www.unicef.be/_webdata/CRC.C.BEL_.CO_.3-4.doc
TOWARDS A CHILD RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO CHILD POVERTY

No social phenomenon has more effect on children’s rights than poverty. Poverty can, partially or totally, violate economic and social rights such as the right to health, housing, food and the right to education. The same is true of civil and political rights, such as the right to participation and the right to security.

The objective of a child rights based approach to child poverty is simple: to assure each child a quality existence that respects his right to dignity and optimal development. However, realising this objective is considerably complex.

This approach not only anticipates clear political responsibilities, but also demands a multidimensional and consistent approach. It includes the need for suitable monitoring and accountability. Finally, this approach is based on the inseparable three P’s of Protection, Provision and Participation.

UNICEF Belgium is advocating for a child rights-based approach to child poverty. This recommendation is due in part to the growing recognition of the fact that the income based approach to poverty has not been able to reduce child poverty substantially because it does not respond to the complexity of the reality, or the needs of the people affected. It seems that to combine children's rights, the fight against poverty and participation may prove more effective than a single approach.

BENEFITS

Since it relies on participation and is multidimensional, a child rights-based approach has the potential to help achieve the objectives of governments, parents and the children themselves. There are many benefits to a child rights-based approach:

• **It encourages social progress** by acting on several fronts (non-discrimination, the greater interests of the child, survival and development, participation);

• **It contributes to positive social changes** by ensuring that children become the subjects of rights and are no longer regarded as objects of them;

• **It is more sustainable**: treating children with respect and letting them participate will lead to improvements in the measures taken to fight poverty in the long term;

• **It produces the best economic results**: this approach can be fully consistent with all government programmes intended to create an economically viable workforce. Measures aimed at promoting universal access to services and overcoming discrimination will broaden the economic base of society, thus strengthening the country’s economic capacity.

• **It strengthens capabilities**: fulfill their obligations in affording the families the necessary assistance so that they can fully assume their role. This approach also enhances children's capacities to mobilise themselves.

In conclusion, the rights of children experiencing poverty can only be achieved using a multidimensional child rights based approach, along with the active commitment of everyone involved to fulfil their responsibilities and a long-term view.

We hope that this report will be used by policy makers, child right and poverty organisations in their combat against child poverty and social exclusion.
THE VOICE OF CHILDREN CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.

THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IS A DEMOCRATIC RIGHT. EXPRESS YOURSELF!


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