

The Rights of the Child and the G20 Summit

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Nineteen rich countries and the EU are preparing for the G20 Summit. What brought this group together initially was their GDP size and their concern with the 2007/2008 massive financial crisis. After a brief flirtation with Keynesian ideas about governments' responsibility in economic crises, they now cohere in their (misguided) belief in neoliberal policy making.

As we know, the austerity and deregulation policies adopted by the majority of the G20 governments are extremely harmful. Decent jobs that are paid properly and come with social security guarantees for incidents of illness or accident, and for old age, have been replaced by zero hour jobs and exploitative gig economy stints. Women – traditionally facing triple roles in paid and unpaid work and as carers – forego the little government support they used to receive from a welfare state. Low-income families are seeing their benefits cut massively, or made conditional on demeaning conditionalities. Public housing is scarce and crumbling; school buildings go unrepaired; professionals needed to support children with learning needs are not employed. Health services are systematically under-staffed and under-resourced (UK), or pamper the well-covered upper classes while reserving less resources for low-income groups (Germany). In Germany, 1.8 million people, in the UK, nearly a million people, currently have to resort to food banks since their incomes do not suffice to buy sufficient food; many of these users are women-headed households.

And on top of all this, austerity has not restored growth to pre-crisis levels – any more than it did in Africa and Latin America where, after twenty years of such policies, Latin America had experienced two decades of economic decline followed by partial recovery, and Sub-Saharan Africa was actually poorer in per capita income than in 1980.

The people who are most desperately affected by these unacceptable policies are children. Children have less voice and do not vote, so their rights remain disregarded, nearly 30 years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And, let it never be forgotten, children are the future – and their present poverty means marks down future investment across the economy and society.

As a direct result of austerity, and of unfettered capitalism more generally, the lives and futures of children are already being set back – in spite of the fact that they make up one half of the world's poor. Fresh research from UNICEF shows that the numbers of children in poverty in rich countries has increased - or been caused to increase - by austerity policies - by 2.6 million from 2008 to 2012.¹ An average of one in five children in 41 high-income countries lives in poverty.²

At the G20 summit, the heads of state and their policy makers will be under public scrutiny and on their toes. More than 300 CSOs have issued an urgent Civil Society 20 (C20) Call to adjust trade, fiscal, energy, climate, agricultural and other policies so as to meet the SDG commitment that each of the G20 governments have made to “leave no one behind” and eradicate poverty by 2030. A central point in the C20 manifesto is to end the “imposition of austerity policies and encourage public budgets

that promote development, poverty eradication and social justice”.³ But even in this powerful document, children and their rights do not feature.

For some children, the call to responsible policy action already comes too late. In Germany, police are pulling children of asylum-seeking families out of their classrooms, to deport them back to their allegedly safe countries of origin – an inhuman measure to diminish the cost of housing refugees in Germany – one of the richest countries of the world in per capita terms, and with a fiscal budget surplus! In the UK, children predominate in the faces of those who perished in the Grenfell Tower fire – which was ultimately caused by cost-cutting when that public housing site was refurbished.

As a funky German rock band recently put it, we need to ‘wake the f* up’.⁴

¹ Bea Cantillon, Yekaterina Chzhen, Sudhanshu Handa and Brian Nolan, 'Children of Austerity: Impact of the Great Recession on Child Poverty in Rich Countries' . UNICEF and Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2017

² UNICEF Innocenti Office of Research. Building the Future. Children and the Sustainable Development Goals in Rich Countries . Innocenti Report Card OECD 14. 2017. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC14_eng.pdf.

³ C20 Communiqué. THE URGENT NEED FOR BETTER INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION. Conclusion of the Civil20 Summit, Hamburg, 19 June 2017. <https://civil-20.org/c20-summit/>

⁴ Hamburg-based Rapper Samy Deluxe at a UNICEF fundraising concert peacepeace, Berlin, June 2017. For the – somewhat despondent - lyrics see <https://genius.com/Samy-deluxe-weck-mich-auf-lyrics>

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