

Austerity: a children's rights issue



Scotland's Commissioner
for Children & Young People

Overview

Austerity is a word that is often misunderstood. In this briefing, it is used to mean actions taken by a state which are directed towards reducing its budget deficit. In post-crisis Europe, these have included:

- public sector wage bill cuts or caps
- pension reform
- limiting subsidies
- cuts to social protection programmes such as social security, education, health and youth justice.

Such measures disproportionately affect low-income earners when they are financially vulnerable, and all have impacted on children and their rights. [The Institute for Fiscal Studies forecasts](#) that up to 100,000 more children in the UK will be in poverty by 2020 as a direct result of welfare reform and austerity measures.

Living in poverty does not simply affect children's childhood experiences, but also frequently serves to curtail the life chances available to them as adults.

How austerity relates to children's rights

The recent financial and economic crises and state responses to them have had a significant detrimental effect on children's rights under the UNCRC. Although the UNCRC does not prescribe a particular economic model, it does highlight important considerations to take into account in economic decision making and processes.

Article 4 of the UNCRC requires states to undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures to implement the rights it lays out. It states that:

- there are **minimum core obligations**— children should be ensured the minimum essential level of rights
- the **most socially deprived** and **most vulnerable** children must be prioritised in economic policymaking
- economic policies must **not have a discriminatory impact**
- resource constraints provide no excuse for a state failure to realise **civil and political rights**
- states must use the maximum of the resources available to them for realisation of **economic, social and cultural rights**.

Failure to realise an economic, social or cultural right can only be justified where the resources available to a state are demonstrably inadequate. Where this is the case, states must progressively realise economic, social and cultural rights, and show that they are moving as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards doing so.

Briefing

December 2014

Austerity: a children's rights issue



Scotland's Commissioner
for Children & Young People

Where a state seeks to take regressive measures in realising economic, social and cultural rights, it must demonstrate that it has undertaken careful consideration of all alternatives, including giving due weight to children's expressed views.

Barriers relating to children's rights

It is indisputable that children have been deeply affected by austerity measures. However, few people appear to be linking breaches of children's rights to economic policy or using the language of rights effectively. Working with economists to provide models that integrate human rights concerns with economic analyses will be key to changing this.

The Commissioner's key messages

- Children and young people's experiences and ideas must be heard as part of any review of policies or practice.
- UK and Scottish governments must carry out child rights based analyses of budget and economic decision making, processes and outcomes.
- Policies, laws and practices must be compliant with relevant instruments on the protection of children— particularly the UNCRC.
- We must challenge claims that there is no alternative to austerity measures.

Further information

For further information on any issues raised in this briefing, please contact Máire McCormack, Head of Policy: maire.mccormack@sccyp.org.uk

For more detail on the Commissioner's position on this issue, [*read his full briefing on austerity.*](#)

[*Read the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children's statement on austerity.*](#)