

## What matters more to children: Cultural and social resources or material resources? Through the lens of Afghanistan

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The determining factor allowing a child's potential to be realised in adult life remains a contentious issue complicated by numerous factors regarding upbringing. There are so many differing theories on how income is key to outcomes for children, particularly due to its interrelationship with many non-financial factors, such as family background, parental education, good parenting and opportunities for learning and development. In my opinion, whilst these factors are important in influencing positive outcomes and life chances, evidence suggests that poverty reduces a family's ability to invest in their children.

Children experiencing poverty and social problems during childhood, compared to their more advantaged peers, go on to be disadvantaged in many areas of their adolescence. Some scholars give greater prominence to the earliest years in life, from pregnancy to age five, and believe that addressing disadvantages experienced during the first years of life would ensure they are attended to sooner, rather than later. It's also just as important not to disregard the opportunities for learning and development, accessible at later ages.

If we were to answer this question by focusing on Afghanistan, we can really see how money can be viewed as playing an important combined role in child development and should not be isolated from non-financial factors. To illustrate the situation children face in Afghanistan, I'd like to present two real life case studies, from the LA Times.

*"Sami Rahimi, a 13 year old child, wakes up at 5am, having slept on a cold concrete floor. He begins his day by sweeping, and then washes in cold water before he prays. He then pushes his wheelbarrow to gather water from a public well to take to the bakery where he works. By 6am the gas-fired stone kiln is ready to bake flatbread. He sits cross-legged to sell the loaves for 100 Afghanis (which is about 20 cents) to customers, through a little window. Working from dawn to dusk, six days a week, allows him to earn about 80 dollars a month, which he uses to support his*

*disabled father, mother, 3 brothers and 5 sisters. He has been at the bakery since he was 8. He states that he is happy that he has the opportunity to support to family but would rather go to school and become educated”.*

*“Abdul Rafi follows a similar routine, having to wake up every day at 5am, and began work at the age of 6. He has a croaky voice, like a smoker, as he screams out fares to find passengers for taxis. As the oldest son, he is required to support his family. Most days he barely earns 3 dollars. He aspires to be a soldier one day, a literate one. Unlike Sami he takes a break to attend school for four hours. But as he is so tired and always thinking about his earnings, he does not concentrate very well.”*

Many of the children state that they would rather just go to school, but their family needs money. So poverty crushes their every aspiration of becoming educated and entering a professional career in the future. These children come from disabled, widowed or low-income families who are unable to provide for themselves.

From these examples, it's evident that cultural and material resources don't emerge in isolation from each other and therefore don't comprise inseparable components that can't be disconnected. These children want to learn and receive education yet money is a major barrier that is simply not allowing them to reach their full potential.

Not everyone takes this perspective. In 2015, a UK study of child poverty by Peruzzi found that poverty isn't mechanically related to children's development if they're able to experience other opportunities and become involved in many activities. This opinion holds that experiences outside the family home also matter, going beyond the understanding that children are only substantially affected by their family's financial position. This view doesn't coincide with Afghanistan, as poor families are not affected solely by their low income. Many families in poverty have other characteristics associated with poorer children, such as the availability of time. It's important to understand the complexity of this relationship and whether this difference between the investment of goods and time can be mutually exclusive or whether they are two factors that work hand-in-hand.

Returning to the focus on Afghanistan, we can ascertain that money shouldn't be seen as an independent factor but one that can affect many other aspects which could support children in realising their potential. Even though some assume that potential benefits of positive parenting, parental education and family background are evident for children, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances, this understanding fails to consider the likelihood for a poor family to offer good parenting. This is not suggesting that poorer mothers and fathers are incapable of good parenting, but strains on resources could often affect the way in which they deal with their children. In countries such as Afghanistan, children are expected to work. For the majority, there's no choice in the matter as their families depend on their income. As such, poverty directly affects their future attainment and whether their potential can be realised in adult life.

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