

## Improving the Well-Being of Children: Stories of Development Success

On April 20, 2012, the Center for Universal Education (CUE) hosted “Improving the Well-Being of Children: Stories of Development Success,” launching a report commissioned by UNICEF and Save the Children and prepared by the [Overseas Development Institute](#) (ODI). Nonresident Senior Fellow [Kevin Watkins](#) opened the event by describing the premise of the report [Progress in Child Well-Being: Building on what works](#), which looks at the successful impact of international development efforts on the well-being of children. In the current policy climate that has become increasingly critical of development assistance, the report counters the criticism by highlighting development successes.

[Alison Evans](#), director of ODI, elaborated on the report’s findings, suggesting that it is time for policy and decision-makers to see the glass as half-full based on robust evidence on what works to improve child-wellbeing, as well as what is needed to address remaining gaps. The report argues that despite several obstacles to substantial improvement in child well-being, which include the poor quality of education and high school dropout rates in many developing countries, notable progress has been made in areas such as access to and completion of primary school and transition to lower secondary school, reducing fewer than five mortality rates and increasing immunization rates. Evans cautioned that, although global and regional enrolment rates in many areas are improving, there is a need to focus on issues of equity to close the gap between the most marginalized. One of the major takeaways of the report was that equity issues should be integrated at the outset of reform and should not be treated as a side issue to be addressed later. Evans discussed other factors identified in the report associated with progress, including domestic political commitment to reform, investment in holistic and multi-sectoral

approaches to child well-being, adequate resourcing from both state and non-state actors and an enabling political and economic environment. Evans concluded with an overview of the five recommendations made in the report:

1. Increased government commitment, with the state acting where possible as both a provider and regulator of programs and services.
2. Alignment of development assistance with government strategies that is focused on identified priorities.
3. Equity-focused social and economic policies to accompany the drive toward greater economic growth.
4. Interventions that are integrated across related sectors as part of multi-year social protection programs.
5. A greater focus on addressing inequalities in access to services by extending protection to the poorest children and more impoverished communities within countries.

Daniel Stoner, associate vice president for Child Development and Education at [Save the Children](#), responded to the report by highlighting some of the achievements seen in the field: there were 12,000 fewer deaths per day among children under five in 2012 than there were in 1990; childhood stunting declined in developing countries from 45 percent in 1990 to 28 percent in 2008; and the proportion of adolescents who were out-of-school fell by 21 percent between 1999 and 2009. Building on the findings of the report, Stoner proposed several ways to furthering the agenda of child well-being and development. He recommended a focus on those hardest to reach children, for example, those with disabilities or living in fragile states. He also suggested that successful early childhood development programs, such as those in Chile and Brazil, be highlighted internationally as models for other countries seeking to expand early childhood coverage.

Jaime Saavedra, director of the Poverty Reduction and Equity department at the [World Bank](#), commented on the value of a “what works” focus in this report, given the growing orientation toward evidence-based policymaking, particularly at the major international donors such as [USAID](#) and the World Bank. However, he questioned whether the benchmarks for eliminating poverty and other measures of well-being were too low, implying that recorded improvements along various indicators are less substantial than perceived. At the same time, even if improvements are seen, he questioned how

far countries actually are from where they should be in terms of child well-being. He recommended that countries redirect expenditures toward the poor, given the evidence that the majority of current government spending disproportionately benefits those at the top of the income distribution. He added that redistribution across ages is important, requiring governments to put greater emphasis on children, as adults have disproportionately reaped the benefits of poverty reduction programs.

Björn Gillsater, chief and head of the Multilateral System Analysis office at [UNICEF](#), commented on the importance of this report for demonstrating the shared goals of major organizations working on improved child development like UNICEF and Save the Children. With current fiscal belt tightening, immediate growth-enhancing investments in physical infrastructure have been favored over those in areas with longer timelines for reaping the benefits, such as education. Thus, it is important to highlight the value of development assistance in areas directly impacting child well-being to ensure that it is not left off the global agenda. Gillsater also [noted](#) that as stories of success in development assistance are gaining traction, there is scope for increased policy support for programs that prioritize child well-being.

As the road to 2015 approaches and the discussions around the next global development agenda heighten, citing examples where “development works” will be an important tactic for setting the way forward for development into the next decade. In the end, a strong case can be made for placing improved well-being – for children and adults – as the ultimate objective of this next generation of development.