

# Children's rights in policy and poverty:

An analysis of Iceland, Norway & the UK

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## Abstract

This article presents the analysis of three areas of child policy assumed by scholars and recent research to relieve child poverty: child benefits, child support and early childhood education and care (ECEC) from a children's rights perspective by comparing Iceland, Norway and the UK, 1991–2011, asking when, if and how do children's rights emerge in these policies. A new framework was created combining both children's rights and child poverty theories with comparative analysis. The results indicate that when and in what form children's rights emerged not only suggests a classification of the three states: Iceland as an Equality-Integrity Rights based system; Norway an Integrity Rights based system; and the UK a Family-Centred/Social Investment system. It also opened up an understanding of the three policy areas studied; i.e. that the triangular relationship between the state, parent and child is very important and policy specific. These results can help guide policymakers in their search for evidence-based policies, as well as offering activists, researchers and social workers a simple, sophisticated tool to gauge children's rights in policies.

**Keywords:** child poverty, children's rights, child policy, child support, child benefit, ECEC.

## Útdráttur

Þessi grein fjallar um niðurstöður doktorsrannsóknar á félagsmálalæstefnu í barnafátækt er lýtur að þremur sviðum: barnabótum, meðlagi og umönnun yngri barna og leikskóla. Í rannsókninni voru skoðaðar stefnur er varða barnafátækt í þremur löndum, Íslandi, Noregi og Bretlandi. Þær voru bornar saman með áherslu á það í hvaða mynd réttindi barna birtast í stefnum landanna á tímabilinu 1991–2011. Spurt var að því hvenær, hvort og hvernig réttindi barna væru skilgreind á ofangreindum sviðum. Kenningarlegur rammi verksins var smíðaður með því að samþætta kenningar um réttindi barna og barnafátækt og með því að beita samanburðargreiningu. Niðurstöðurnar benda til þess að eftir því hvenær og í hvaða mynd réttindi barna birtast megi setja fram eftirfarandi flokkun: Ísland með jafnrétti og sjálfstæð réttindakerfi (e. equality/integrity rights), Noregur með réttindakerfi sjálfstæðis (e. integrity rights) og Bretland með fjölskyldumiðað og félagslegt fjárfestingarkerfi (e. family centred/social investment). Niðurstöður veita aukinn skilning á þeim sviðum sem rannsókuð voru og mikilvægi

þrjúþættra tengsla á milli ríkis, foreldra og barns. Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar eru mikilvægar þar sem þær geta nýst stefnumótendum sem vilja þróa gagnreyndar stefnur (e. evidence-based policies). Kenningarrámminn sem þróaður var í þessari rannsókn sem greiningartæki er víðtækur en þó einfaldur í notkun. Rámminn gagnast fagfólki og rannsakendum sem vilja hafa áhrif á réttindi barna, þar á meðal félagsráðgjafa.

**Lykilorð:** barnafátækt, réttindi barna, félagsmálalæstefnur barna, meðlag, barnabætur, leikskólar.

## Introduction

Child poverty is an issue faced by every nation, including the affluent, where a percentage of children are still affected by their socio-economic situation. This may lead to ill health, lower well-being and lower education scores, to name a few, and can persist from generation to generation (Vlemincx & Smeeding, 2001). Furthermore, since the 1970s the gap between the affluent and poor continues to increase throughout OECD states (OECD, 2011b), where there has been “notable changes in the shape of the income distribution in many, but not all, western developed nations” (Jenkins & Micklewright, 2007, p. 2). In other words, the rich are getting richer and poor poorer (Jenkins & Micklewright, 2007; OECD, 2011b).

The persistence of child poverty in affluent nations is perplexing in so far as poverty rates for the elderly have decreased over the post-war era, but has risen for children (Vlemincx & Smeeding, 2001). Policies are needed to address child poverty in the same way that old-age insurance schemes were created in the last century to protect the elderly. “There is no reason why the same could not happen for the problem of child poverty” (Vlemincx & Smeeding, 2001, p. 2).

At the same time as these changes in child poverty and income distribution occurred, children's rights continued to develop, culminating in the creation and adoption of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UN CRC). Since then, the focus on children in



policy and research has gained momentum (Flekkøy, 1995; Franklin, 2002; Freeman, 2002; Johansson, 2005; Pilknik, 2006; Ridge, 2013). With all but two nation-states ratifying the UN CRC, it has created the space for children to be discussed in both national and international policy arenas.

By pairing children's rights with child poverty research, not only does a strong argument for the reduction of child poverty emerge, but children's rights may also indicate how to alleviate the various forms of child poverty that are known (Vranken, Vandenhoe & De Boyser, 2010). Vranken et al. (2010) and others have pointed out the importance of striking a balance between the child, parent and state in creating policies to alleviate poverty from a children's rights perspective.

Arguably, the power to alleviate child poverty lies at the feet of policymakers, and children, as individuals and not statistical units, are underrepresented in studies that influence these policies (Alderson, 2008; Ben-Arieh & Goerge, 2005; Johansson, 2005; Middleton, Ashworth & Braithwaite, 1997; Ridge, 2013). This article will examine the overall results of a PhD study conducted at the University of Bath 2007–2013 that joins the efforts of recent research and well-being studies trying to change this trend.

This study sets out to examine children's rights in those policies suggested by scholars (Bradbury & Jäntti, 2001; Bradbury, Jenkins & Micklewright, 2001; Bradshaw, 2006b; Danziger & Waldfogel, 2000; Vleminckx & Smeeding, 2001; Vranken et al., 2010) to alleviate child poverty in the two decades following the inception of the UN CRC, 1991–2011. The question that emerges as the result of the analysis of the existing research is as follows: To what extent has the discourse of children's rights permeated policies on child poverty?

As this is a fairly new area of research, the scope of this study was determined by 1) the need to create a new framework to examine policies from a children's rights perspective; 2) choosing a set of policies that address child poverty. Therefore the aim of this study is twofold: to examine the extent to which the discourse of children's rights has permeated policies on child poverty and to test the framework created to conduct such a study.

### Analytical Framework

Although the UN CRC presents a number of productive elements for use in conducting comparative policy research (e.g. universality), but due to its flexibility in

interpretation, amongst other factors, it was necessary to combine other prominent theories to create a more focused and concrete research tool. Poverty is not addressed directly by the UN CRC and it was due to the process of going back through the creation of the UN CRC that the significance of not just economic welfare, but how social exclusion, capabilities and the three P's (provision, protection and participation) were mapped onto the UN CRC; significant areas to examine when looking at how child poverty is addressed in social policy.

Thus, the focus on children's rights was deepened further by examining the recent history of these policies for clues or instances of what Therborn (1993) called:

*child-centred family rights*, a consensual union of parents and children in place of a transcendental paternal hierarchy and the idea of the best interest of the child,

*equality rights*, equality between children regardless of their parents' marital status,

*integrity rights*, legitimizes the autonomy and the personal integrity of the child, both inside and outside the family context (Therborn, 1993, pp. 254–256).

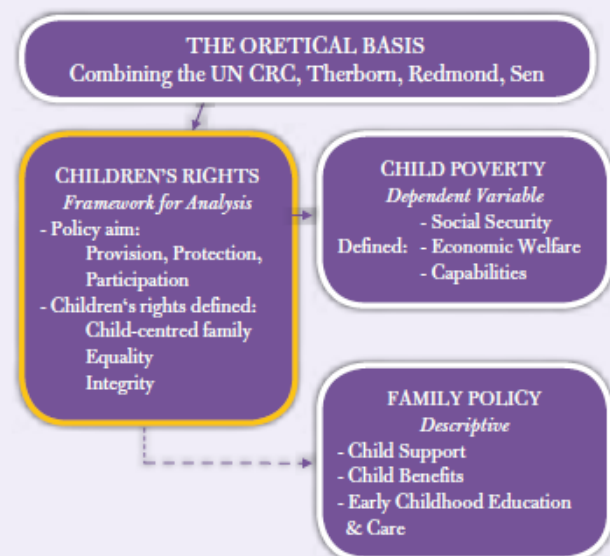


Figure 1. Analytical framework created for this study.

Figure 1 depicts the framework created for the analysis of children's rights in policies assumed to reduce child poverty as a synthesis of the UN CRC's three P's (provision, protection and participation) and Therborn's (1993) categorisation of children's rights in social poli-



cy (child-family centred, equality and integrity rights). The former examines the aim of the policies and the latter how and in what form children's rights emerge in the policies.

#### Data

The three states have been selected based on Iceland's unique blend of Beveridge and Scandinavian welfare models, the UK's recent push to reduce child poverty in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and Norway's notorious child-friendly culture. Furthermore, all three states were influenced initially by Beveridge, but have each evolved in different directions over the last half century.

The policies selected are not only assumed to alleviate child poverty, but also reflect the UN CRC's definition of an adequate standard of living (p. 1 art. 27). Arguments could be made for choosing various policies to examine in this context, but the following three policy areas were selected based on the current understanding of which policy areas are assumed to have the greatest effect on alleviating child poverty: child support, child benefits and early childhood education and care (see e.g. Bradbury & Jäntti, 2001; Bradshaw, 2003, 2006a, 2007; Brewer, Browne & Sutherland, 2006; Cordon, 1999; Danziger & Waldfogel, 2000; Gregg, 2008; Harker, 2006; Hakorvirta, 2010; OECD, 2011a).

Analysing *child support* policies allows an analysis of not only the provision of economic welfare and its potential implications in reducing child poverty, but also the implications in regard to basic children's rights, i.e. the right of children to be provided for, by, and have access to, both parents. Furthermore, an examination of child support will place the obligation of the parents (as defined in the UN CRC art. 18) and the importance of the states' role in supporting parents in fulfilling this obligation firmly within this discourse on children's rights.

While analysing *child benefit* policies offers an opportunity to examine the idea of citizenship (Lister, 2003, 2004, 2008), it also looks at the provision of social security and the economic protection of children by the state, giving an indication of how children are perceived within this particular society and their value or worth.

When it comes to analysing capabilities, Sen (1999) believes that currently there are only three main areas of research that are capable of measuring and defining these capabilities: infant and child mortality, nutri-

tion and participation in education. Furthermore, the care factor of ECEC needs to be considered. Studies show that when subsidised, regulated care is offered there is a concomitant decrease in poverty as the parents of young children have the opportunity to work (Bradshaw, 2003, 2006b; Bradshaw & Finch, 2006; Bradshaw & Mayhew, 2006). Here, the study will look at the *provision of early childhood education and care schemes* such as Sure Start children's centres in the UK or playschools (*I. leikskóli*) in Iceland and kindergartens (*N. barnehage*) in Norway, based on significant research that shows how children in low-income households benefit from early access to education and the implications that access to affordable, reliable childcare reduces child poverty.

#### Methods

This is a comparative social policy study based on child-centred and children's rights theories. So far the practicality of using tools such as Therborn's (1993) categorisation of children's rights in social policy, and the UN CRC's three P's—provision, protection and participation—have been presented.

The most obvious reason for comparing states is to look at their differences and similarities (Hantrais, 1999). Wintersberger Alanen, Olk & Qvortrup (2007) find that generational analysis, or in other words the study of children in welfare analysis, is the third tier in social and policy analysis.

Generational analysis in the sense of confronting the condition of children at large with the condition of adults is one of the most recent developments in structure oriented childhood research, adding a third structural level to the existing ones of class and gender in particular...to some extent the process of introducing the generational perspective has similarities with the difficult journey of the feminist movement towards establishing gender (besides social class) as a recognized level in welfare analysis (Wintersberger et al., 2007, p. 13).

In order to conduct a comparative analysis, first *Interpretive Policy Analysis* was applied to each separate policy and document with the aim of keeping the analysis open to new ideas and concepts that emerged as each document was analysed (Yannow, 2000). Once the policies were analysed individually, a comparative analysis was conducted systematically aided by a list of standardised questions.

The issues faced by the study included the large variances in the implementation of the UNCRC that exists



and sometimes the “blatant failure to comply” (Pilnik, 2006, p. 26). However, one could argue that the UN CRC is still a beneficial place to start, regardless of the obvious variations of interpretation that one will have to be constantly aware of as a researcher. All states but one have signed and all but two have ratified the UN CRC, therefore there is some degree of underlying consensus concerning the aims and goals of this treaty.

Furthermore, there is the question of depth of analysis and that by choosing three states in which to compare three areas of policy there will be a lack of relative depth than would otherwise exist if one was examining one state, one policy or one policy area in detail. This broad overview is necessary at this time for testing the framework's ability to categorise on a comparative basis. There are advantages to be found with the comparative framework and the results here indicate areas that would benefit with more in-depth studies conducted at a later date.

Finally, relationships between countries mean that they cannot be regarded as independent entities. It is important to acknowledge that this study actually depended somewhat on this interdependence between countries, as evident by the seemingly widespread agreement on the basic premises of the UN CRC. Thus, a comparative study will expand our understanding of the different policy approaches towards family/child policy in the three countries selected for comparison (Iceland, Norway and UK).

## Results

Certain overall results surfaced during the categorisation of the three states, such as the interrelationship between (1) the emphasis of the UN CRC on parent and state obligations, (2) actual state intervention, and (3) emphasis on the child-parent relationship to define and categorise the states' policies. This supports Vranken's et al. (2010) argument of the importance in striking a balance between the three agents involved, the state, the parents and the child, in order to ensure the best possible outcome for children.

Another result of this study, albeit not so surprising, was the relationship between *integrity rights* and the UN CRC's three P's (provision, protection and participation) as results indicated that if a scheme's aim included all three P's, then integrity rights were most likely found.

Overall, the framework created for this study has been quite robust and can be easily applied to other studies. It offered both a way to categorise the aim of a

policy and the type of rights defined within the policy implicitly or explicitly and the results indicated that the balance between the three agents (state, parent and child) was policy specific.

## Child Support and Economic Welfare

Child support schemes have evolved from strategies to recoup funds and have started to be more child or family centred (Bradshaw, 2006a). As studies show, support payments are widely contingent upon access and relationships (Bradshaw, 2007; Skevik, 2006). In this study the aim of *protection* in a policy as defined by the three P's is indirectly evident in clauses that encourage counselling and mediation; by nurturing the bonds between family members and generations, the child becomes protected from social exclusion. All three states seem to be moving towards mediation, however, in the case of the UK, payment for services discriminates against children in less advantaged households.

The aim of *participation*, or the child's right to be heard and consulted on matters that concern them, should be an important part of child support policies. Iceland and Norway both have provisions for children to voice their opinion, but Norway goes a step further by mandating that a child must be consulted in regard to joint residency (N. *delt bosted*).

The aim of *provision* can be defined by children's rights to paternity and the obligation of parents to provide for them. In all three states, these two ideas were paramount, popping up repeatedly in the proposals of current legislation, the difference being in how these terms were applied and interpreted.

The state's support of the parents' obligation defines how children's *economic welfare* is maintained when the dynamics of the family changes. States that provide guaranteed (advance) payment systems such as Iceland and Norway ensure that children are not punished for their parents' action (i.e. non-payment of support). Furthermore, as studies have shown, focus on the social aspect of access ensures the willingness of non-resident parents paying (Bradshaw, 2007). These results indicate that any focus on children's rights in child support policies will directly or indirectly affect their economic welfare for the better. This, however, is not the case in Iceland, where the non-resident parent is mandated to pay a minimum in child support regardless of access or income, unlike the Norwegian and British models (Friðriksdóttir & Eydal, 2010). In this case, right to access would not influence child support payments, and therefore not affect the economic



status of the child directly, but as studies have shown (see e.g. Bradshaw, 2007) access has also other indirect social implications that can influence a child's well-being and socio-economic status.

Therefore, as complicated as child support policies are and as controversial as they can be, these results indicate that children's rights are an integral part of these policies especially when it comes to the social aspects of access to parents, obligations to care and participation. A policy with aims based on the three P's, *participation* in particular, would ensure the rights of all actors, i.e. each parent and the child. Policies in the Nordic states are starting to incorporate participation rights, and therefore integrity rights, and focus on more than just the economic factors, such as the social significance that child support policies can have.

### Child Benefit and Social Security

All three states refer to or include aspects of the UN-CRC in their child benefit policies when speaking of the best interest of the child and the obligation of the state towards children. Therefore, the influence of the UNCRC on policies in this field is evident.

If, as scholars have suggested, child benefits are the cornerstone of children's rights, a badge of citizenship (Bradshaw & Mayhew, 2006; Daniel & Ivatts, 1998; Lister, 2003) and confirm a state's obligation towards children then, during the time in question, Norway and the UK are further along the path towards children's rights and citizenship than Iceland. Norway and the UK offered, at the time of the study, universal child benefits regardless of parental income. Iceland has a strong emphasis on families with children throughout their family policy, but fails to offer children autonomy and universality regardless of parental income, as is the case in Norway and was the case in the UK until 2012.

From this perspective, the aim of *provision* would be almost synonymous with citizenship. However, if the overall aim of provision is the reduction of child poverty then, firstly, the aim of the policy becomes *protection* and secondly, all three states would place relatively well, since in Iceland the threshold is fairly generous ensuring that the majority of families keep some child benefit and where child poverty rates are relatively low. Therefore, one could argue that when it comes to child poverty the rights to *protection* actually override the need for a 'badge of citizenship' and that the autonomy of the child (integrity rights) could still be guaranteed if the legislation and application of the

scheme focused on the child as an individual within the family, as in the case of Norway. Therefore, social security as a social net would become tighter when a focus on integrity rights and policies aimed at protection and provision are applied.

### ECEC, Capabilities, Gender Issues and Social Investment

This area of policy was the most fertile in children's rights rhetoric of all the policy areas analysed in this study. It also allowed an investigation into the social investment or beings/becomings argument, where children are seen not only as the child they are today, but the future worker of tomorrow. The results indicated that a more holistic approach to ECEC was most likely to benefit the child. During the analysis of the results the need to look at ECEC from three main perspectives emerged: 1) that of the child's, *capabilities*; 2) that of the parents', *gender equality*; and 3) that of the state's *social investment*.

Capabilities offer children the opportunity to explore their innate abilities (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). The two Nordic states' focus on pedagogy and well educated staff underscores their focus on capabilities. The UK falters with less educated staff and even less provision. The issue of capabilities is intrinsically interwoven with children's rights (right to access) and social investment (beings/becomings). Furthermore, gender issues are important to ECEC from a children's rights perspective. Similar to White's (2002) findings, it is by examining children's and gender issues together that a better outcome can be envisioned. Thus, it is in finding a balance between the state, mother and child that the best ECEC policy emerges to reduce child poverty.

The results indicated that the UK would be categorised more as a social investment paradigm, with less focus on gender equality than the other two states. In spite of its determined focus on children and child poverty during the time in question, it falls short of universal access to affordable, quality ECEC. Norway took great efforts to combine the UN CRC with their policy alongside their historical focus on early childhood education, which creates some equilibrium between the three agents, but it is the parents that are driving the need for ECEC not policy, with fewer and fewer parents using the cash-for-care scheme. Iceland has focused the most effort of the three states on gender equality paired with a focus on children's rights and early childhood education, but the long hours



**Table 1. Classification of Iceland, Norway and UK, 2011**

	Child Benefit	Child Support	ECEC
<b>Iceland</b>	Equality/Protection	Equality/Provision, Protection (Participation)	Integrity/ Three P's
<b>Norway</b>	Integrity/Provision	Integrity/Three P's	Integrity/ Three P's
<b>UK</b>	Equality/Provision & Protection	Family-centred	Social Investment

children spend in ECEC pulls it more towards a gender-equality scheme.

To reiterate, the results indicated that focusing solely on the rights of either the child or the mother would be unbeneficial, and that there needs to be a merging of both children's rights and gender equality to some extent. They should no longer be treated as mutually exclusive or contradictory. It is in the combining of these two approaches in both policy and research where this policy can move forward.

**Classification**

The classification varies somewhat from one policy area to the other and by utilising the framework the three states have been categorised by its general emphasis or aim.

As table 2 shows, overall Norway can be categorised as an *Integrity Rights* based system; Iceland as an *Equality-Integrity Rights* based system (with an emphasis on protection); and the UK can be categorised as

a *Family-Centred/Social Investment* system in regard to policies concerning child poverty.

Combining the policy approaches in the three states, along with the at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion rates with the results of this thesis, gives an overall view of child policy approaches in these three states and indicates how the approach utilised in this study compliments current research in child and family policy.

**Table 3. Comparison of classical categorisation of welfare state regimes with the results of this study**

	Classical categorisation*	Results of framework
<b>Iceland</b>	Beveridge-Scandinavian	Equality-Integrity Rights/ Protection
<b>Norway</b>	Scandinavian Way	Integrity Rights
<b>UK</b>	Beveridge	Child-family Centred Rights/ Social Investment

When comparing these results with the classical categorisation of welfare state regimes, the results indicate that Iceland continues to have a specific approach to child policy; The Icelandic approach is close to Norway, but still retains its own emphasis on protection rather than universality. Norway's emphasis on children and rights is in step with the Scandinavian model's focus on the family and individuality. The UK's focus on social investment could be seen as an evolu-

**Table 2. Overview of the general results in the analysis of policies from Iceland, Norway and the UK by 2011**

	Iceland		Norway		United Kingdom	
Poverty rates*	16.6		13.0		26.9	
Emphasis on child policy	Family centred and gender equality		Family centred and individualised		Social investment and Child poverty	
Main emphasis on policy	Family and children		Middle class Redistribution and equality		Combined market and family values	
Classical categorization of welfare state	Beveridge/Scandinavian		Scandinavian		Beveridge	
Basis	Income related and universal		Universal		Universal/ market related	
Results	Description	Rights	Description	Rights	Description	Rights
Child Benefits	Means-tested child benefit	Equality Protection	Universal child benefit	Integrity Provision	Universal child benefit Means-tested Child Tax Credit	Equality Provision & Protection
Child Support	State guaranteed system with advance payments	Equality Provision, Protection (Participation)	State guaranteed system with advanced payments	Integrity Three P's	Emphasis on private arrangement Targeted support for parents through CSA/CMEC	Parent-centred
Early childhood education and care	State regulated and local authority subsidised ECEC	Integrity/ Three P's	State regulated and local authority subsidised ECEC	Integrity/ Three P's	Targeted; Sure-Start Universal free 15 hours per week for 3-4 year olds	Social Investment

Sources: Bradshaw (2007); Bradshaw & Finch (2006) Castles, (1993); Cordon (1999); Eydal (2005); Eydal & Ólafsson (2006); Ólafsson, (1999); Skevik (2004); Skevik & Hatland (2008); United Nations (2010). \*Child poverty rates: EUROSTAT (2013). Results shown as percentage of population under 18 years. Eurostat's definition of poverty risk refers to individuals living in households where the equivalised income is below the threshold of 60% of the national equivalised median income. The key advantage of using the median is that it is not influenced by extreme values – either extremely low or high incomes.



tion of Beveridge's emphasis on universal welfare protection with market influences.

### Future Policies Aimed at Reducing Child Poverty

The results of this study indicated that any future policy with the aim of bolstering children's rights while reducing child poverty should consider focusing on the autonomy (*integrity*) of the child within the household (as a separate unit); policy measures should strengthen requirements for child participation while continuing to focus on provision and protection, while not forgetting to strike a balance between the child, parent and state. Thus, as Vranken et al. (2010) claim, children's rights not only tackle the moral issue of poverty, but could offer policymakers a specific way to address child poverty.

### In closing

This study has examined children's rights in child policies assumed to alleviate child poverty. The results show that the Nordic states have a more integrity rights approach. The UK's emphasis on social investment continues to increase with the new austerity measures and children begin to fade from the political discourse, which had dominated the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The results indicate that when and in what form children's rights emerged not only suggests a classification of the three states, it also opened up an understanding of the three policy areas studied; that the triangular relationship between the state, parent and child is very important and policy specific. These results can help guide policymakers in their search for evidence-based policies, as well as offering activists, researchers and social workers a simple, sophisticated tool to gauge children's rights in policies.

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