# Addressing child poverty

https://opinion.inquirer.net/179495/addressing-child-poverty

Nobody celebrates Christmas more enthusiastically than children.

Indeed, their wide smiles and unadulterated joy at receiving presents and partaking of special food make this most wonderful time of the year more festive.

Such joy, however, cannot dispel the bitter reality that Filipino children are in dire straits.

According to a paper issued this month on The Situation of Filipino Children by the Senate Economic Planning Office, children aged zero to 17 often grapple with a multitude of daunting challenges.

“If not adequately addressed, [these challenges] could impede their ability to reach their full potential throughout their lives, and contribute effectively to the nation’s human capital development and economic growth,” the paper stressed.

## Lack of basic facilities

The findings are indeed troubling with the paper declaring that Filipino children “are more likely to live in poverty than the general population as evidenced by higher poverty incidences since 2006.”

Data show that in 2021, child poverty—defined as the proportion of children who belong to families whose income is insufficient to meet their basic food and non-food needs to the total number of children—rose by 2.5 percentage points from 2018, reaching 10.46 million children. This could be attributed to the impacts of the devastating COVID-19 pandemic.

Exacerbating child poverty is the lack of basic water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities in schools—available in only 44 percent, 74 percent, and 61 percent of schools, respectively in 2021.

The lack of these basic facilities impacts children’s health, school attendance, and learning outcomes, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty, according to the Senate paper.

Child poverty incidence, however, does not fully capture what Filipino children are faced with.

The Senate paper found that in 2022, for example, only 59.9 percent of children achieved full vaccination, far short of the ideal 95 percent target.

## Most unvaccinated

The Philippines in fact ranked among the top five countries globally with the most unvaccinated children (637,000 in 2022), putting them at risk of contracting debilitating diseases.

Stunting is another serious public health concern affecting one in five (21.6 percent) infants and toddlers (aged 0 to 23 months) and one in four (26.6 percent) preschoolers (aged 3 to 5), adversely affecting their ability to learn.

The paper also cited that early pregnancies among young girls (under 15 years old) have significantly increased, with total live births among them surging by 35 percent—from 2,320 in 2021 to 3,135 in 2022, which most likely cut short their education thus lowering their ability to land a decent job.

Basic education in the Philippines has also been declared in crisis as less than a fifth of students are acquiring minimum proficiency skills in reading and in mathematics.

Participation of children aged 3 to 4 in pre-kindergarten programs in both public and private schools was low at around 40 percent, according to the Senate report.

## Child labor

Of the 1.1 million working children in 2023, as much as 678,000 or 62 percent were engaged in child labor, a type of work that is harmful to the child’s well-being and development.

Clearly, work must be done to immediately reverse these trends. Failure to do so will threaten the country’s ability to take full advantage of the so-called demographic dividend, or the bump in economic growth due to the presence of a young and productive population.

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, about 37.95 million individuals or 33.62 percent of the projected total population for 2024 are children aged 0 to 17. Of this number, 8.89 million are under 5 years old.

“With declining total fertility and mortality rates shaping the demographic transition over the past decade, the country stands poised to harness a substantial demographic dividend,” the paper said.

This can only happen, however, if these challenges are addressed, and one of the best ways to do that is to channel national and local government officials toward basic services such as health and education so that children can reach their full potential.

Doing so will not only ensure their bright future, but their families and communities as well.