

Framing child poverty in Finland as a 'wicked problem'

1. Introduction

This chapter addresses child poverty in Finland in the context of SDG target 1.2 where countries shall: *'By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.'* This represents an important advance over the previous approach associated with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for two reasons, firstly because of the explicit reference to 'children' and secondly because 'change must happen everywhere' with the SDGs framed as a bottom-up global change project rather than as top-down development aid for the Global South. In this context, policy coherence and governance capacity become key issues complicated further by the realities of a Finnish polity enmeshed in a multilevel governance framework – upwards towards the European Union and downwards to the municipal/regional level of policy implementation and service delivery.

We begin by outlining Finland's relationship with the SDGs, reflecting on the country's positive SDG experience while noting that child poverty remains a problematic issue and therefore an interesting case meriting closer study in a 'wickedness' context. We understand 'wickedness' here not in crude classification terms but rather as a means to better understand complexity, noting that it can be decomposed into technical and value or interest-based 'problematics.' For their part, the SDGs are treated as a practical conceptual (and societal) frame, or 'societal space' within which to discuss child poverty, shedding light on the interconnected nature of the themes and topics encompassing the child poverty discussion while illustrating its inherent policy-related complexity.

To test this approach, we review government level policy platforms in respect of their child poverty-related policy outputs and associate this with the 'At Risk of Poverty' (AROP) and social assistance usage figures. The relatively static nature of these statistics over a near 30-year period implies that there may be, technical issues with the way in which these metrics are constructed, issues around governance and administrative capacity in relation to policymaking and implementation and/or deep value-based disagreements, hindering policy coherence, or a combination thereof. We note, however, that Finland has a stable and highly consensual governance system and that it is a global leader in administrative and governance delivery and experimentation and that these 'capacity-related' factors have been associated with significantly positive impacts in terms of goal attainment. The chapter concludes with a discussion on anti-child poverty outcomes in an SDG context, emerging governance capacity issues and the multilevel service delivery approach.

2. Finland, the SDGs and child poverty

2.1 Overall SDG adaptation

Finland enthusiastically supports the UN's SDGs. It generates 'soft power' from its high-profile participation in the process, particularly in relation to its global ranking on goal completion. In addition, it is a global leader in the implementation of the governance and administrative tools associated with the notion of 'experimental governance,' focusing on public policymaking and service delivery solutions (Leino & Åkerman, 2022). These tools resonate with the governance approach outlined in the SDG framework (specifically related to target 17.17 on multistakeholder partnerships). They are expected to strengthen the capability of the state and society, in partnership, to design and implement strategies that minimise the negative impacts of current social, economic and environmental crises and emerging challenges through the creation of public-private partnerships and the adoption of 'whole of government' thinking, including administrative practices promoting mainstreaming and implementation.

On SDG oversight and implementation, Finland has created a dense field of stakeholders and partnerships – led by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) coordinating the actions of the Ministry of Finance and the other twelve ministries – to monitor and steer developments, maintaining a multidisciplinary approach to cooperation and focusing on the need for policy coherence through cross-sectoral coordination. The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (2016) produced a plan – *The Finland we want by 2050* – which constitutes the Finnish approach to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This plan was aligned with both the Sipilä and Marin Government’s Programme documents reflecting the political choices of each.

In 2021, Finland beat its Nordic neighbours to be ranked first in the annual international sustainable development comparison carried out by the UN in cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation (Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021) scoring 86.51% for ‘goal completion’ - total progress towards achieving all 17 SDGs where the headline figure signifies goals achieved (Sachs et al., 2021). In only two areas, Goals 12 and 13, was it viewed as either facing major challenges or stagnating, while in terms of Goal 1 ‘no poverty’ Finland was viewed as having already attained the goal. Despite the existence of this favourable institutional framework and global recognition of Finland’s implementation success, problems clearly remain.

While the Prime Minister’s Office has a coordinating role, it remains under-resourced with line ministries taking the lead in policy terms, particularly in a multilevel governance context where domestic policy responses have to be coordinated at the EU level. This, in effect, allocates a key role to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, essentially confirming Finland’s historical approach to global governance issues through the prioritisation, in an SDG context, of development aid and the environment – specifically green technology development in the private sector - while significantly underplaying social sustainability questions (Ylönen and Salmivaara, 2021).

Two problems emerge here in terms of Finnish SDG policy coherence and coordination in respect of child poverty. Firstly, the historic Finnish view of the SDGs - and the MDGs before them - has generally not included a strong focus on social policy issues in the context of social sustainability. And secondly, as social policy is weakly coordinated at the EU level, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs is not allocated a coordinating role in the Finnish SDG response meaning that Finland's response to the child poverty issue is weakly coordinated at the international level and is reliant, primarily, on national perspectives and initiatives. This suggests that the likely focus of 'wickedness' will relate to inter-institutional level disputes or 'turf wars' within the domestic social policy set up.

2.2 SDG 1 and the contextualisation of child poverty in Finland

While Finland exhibits virtually no extreme poverty, the focus of SDG 1 – measured, originally, as living on less than \$1.25 a day – child poverty remains a pressing issue. Finland's national response in terms of measuring poverty - the 'national definition' alluded to in SDG target 1.2 - is to use the AROP scale fixed at 60% of the national median income where the AROP rate is calculated as the share of inhabitants in poor households financially below 60% of median income, while the child poverty rate relates to the number of children, counted as 0–17-year-olds, in poor households in relation to all children.

Statistics Finland disaggregated the national poverty figures by age group and gender in their indicator 1.2.1 with figures for 2017-18 showing a slightly higher percentage of female children in poverty than males but with both figures over 10%, while the female figure for 2017 was over 11.5%. These figures tell a story of stubborn persistence. Figure 2 (see Section 4.2) maps AROP and child poverty in Finland (1995-2020). What is striking here is the persistence of both figures above the 10% mark.

While the period has seen a roughly 2%-point drop in each headline figure, we should note that the data starting point represents the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis and thus starts from a relatively high point while the

decline in the headline rates after 2019 is probably a statistical anomaly related to the impact of Covid-19 and the reduction in the overall rate of median income, lifting some people above the new, lower, 60% median rate. This produces the paradoxical result that in economic crises, the number of people falling below the median rate falls rather than rises, at least initially, while major policy changes – the Sipilä government’s social security reforms of 2016-17 and the Marin government’s reversal of most of them in 2019 – do not meaningfully impact these rates. One explanation here is that these reforms did not focus on the most vulnerable groups. Instead, they targeted all families with children as in December 2022, when all such families were given an extra monthly child benefit payment regardless of wealth and income.

During 2022 however the situation of families with children significantly worsened due to inflationary pressure caused by energy price rises. The Social Insurance Institution of Finland (KELA) and Itla Children's foundation estimated that approximately 30 000 children would fall into poverty during 2022, given increases in the cost of living (Hiilamo et al., 2022). Clearly then there are technical problems with the time-trend analysis when measuring child poverty as a ratio statistic affected by factors unrelated to the specific issue of child poverty.

The conclusions of the report from the Parliamentary Committee for the National Child Strategy (Government of Finland, 2021) are also worth noting. The committee stated (ibid., p. 17), that *“[...] children’s wellbeing in Finland is now polarised: while most children are doing well, some are not. The polarisation of wellbeing culminates in crises and emergency conditions, and the adverse consequences of crises accumulate on those who are the most vulnerable.”* The committee’s report underlined that poverty erodes children’s opportunities for equal and non-discriminating inclusion in society, noting (ibid., 17) that *“[...] inequality or poverty experienced in childhood can affect a person well into adulthood, and the multi-generational effects of poverty in families with children are also a cause for concern [...].”*

While the report echoes the findings of poverty scholars and the views of street-level practitioners more generally (Hiilamo et al., 2023) on child and youth poverty, issues around its evolving nature – now increasingly confined to single parent and immigrant families in Finland – are increasingly suggestive of policies and implementation systems which are failing to deal with evolving social situations.

3. Child poverty as a wicked problem in the SDG context

3.1 Policy making in a complex world

Set against its record on child poverty, Finland's position on SDG goal attainment raises several interesting questions around 'wickedness.' Its strong performance in comparative global statistical terms, including that on child poverty calculated after social transfers (Leppik, 2022), needs to be weighed against the stubborn persistence of the country's child poverty headline rate and its seeming inability to reduce it below 10%.

This is particularly evident in relation to Finland's global profile on social inclusion where again, it scores comparatively highly and where reporting on progress in respect of target 1.2 is generally positive (OECD, 2022, PMO, 2020) but where the government's 'no change' self-assessment in that document is effectively refuted by civil society stakeholders who view the trend in respect of target 1.2 as negative.

Child poverty has then become the 'forgotten stepchild' in Finland's SDG success story – an issue where, despite its comparative global ranking position, target attainment remains distant, with child poverty levels reducing only slightly in the first five years of the SDG period (2015-2020) and with little expectation that the 1.2 goal will be met by 2030. In addition, we note that Finland failed to fulfil its commitment to 'reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 150,000 by 2020' as part of the EU's Europe 2020 strategy (Järvinen & Saarela, 2021) again raising questions over policy coherence and implementation capacity.

The explanation here is clearly complex, echoing the notion of 'wickedness,' originally outlined by Rittel and Webber (1973). Initially conceived in an urban planning context, its usage has nevertheless migrated well beyond that field into the realm of public policy more generally. The descriptive literature charting this movement is already extensive (Termeer et al., 2019; Turnbull & Hoppe, 2019; Peters 2017; Newman & Head, 2017; Head, 2022; Head & Alford, 2015) with 'wickedness' understood to encompass institutional and/or organisational complexity, scientific uncertainty and social pluralism (Head & Alford, 2015).

Organisational complexity here refers to diverging responsibilities related to the vertical division of labour related to family social security and family services (between the MSAF and Kela) and, the horizontal division of labour between the, approximately, 300 municipalities responsible for the delivery of family services and the central level of governance (MSAH). Historically, health and social services including schools, libraries and children's day care, were provided by the municipalities. On 1.1.2023, 21 'wellbeing service counties' formed a new regional level of governance. These elected authorities assumed responsibility for organising all health, social care and emergency services thus confirming a significant administrative shift from decentralised to recentralised service provision (Tiirinki et al., 2022).

Scientific uncertainty relates to different types of poverty measurement metrics. In the Finnish context, poverty is relative. Deprivation is measured against the living standards of the population at large. Relative poverty is often defined using the at-risk-of poverty (AROP) concept. As noted above however. There are problems associated with this approach where macroeconomic changes can trigger paradoxical outcomes.

Finally, *political pluralism* reflects disagreement over the causes of poverty and the best way to alleviate it. These views are illustrative of a core political philosophy divide evoking different policy responses. The historical divide between right and left was clear. For the former, poverty was caused by individual behaviour such as laziness or indolence. As such, poverty was

viewed in relation to individual moral decline. The policy response to this was to promote employment as the route out of poverty, if necessary, through forced labour market activation schemes and minimal social transfers. For the latter, poverty was a result of systemic factors relating to disruptions in the economic system leading to labour shedding. The response to this centred around income maintenance to enable continued societal participation. While Finnish social policy remained broadly consensus-based across our study period, with these philosophical themes recurring periodically, the political consensus that emerged was a predominantly neoliberal one around NPM-inspired approaches to the work and benefits regime, driven by the need for efficiency measures and cost containment in the public sector.

The child poverty issue in Finland clearly exhibits aspects of all three of these 'wickedness' signifiers. Finland's social services system is multi-level with government policy implemented at the municipal, now as of 2023, at the regional level. Additionally, the benefits system is highly complex, often incoherent and lacking in transparency, resulting in institutional and/or organisational disputes over competence and responsibility and their associated 'benefits traps' for claimants (Verho et al. 2022).

Similarly, uncertainty surrounds the issue in regards to a range of technical questions concerning the definition and measurement of child poverty (Mikkonen, 2013) while disagreement over values and interests at the political level remained during the study period, although successive government coalitions employed broadly similar policy responses in respect of child poverty, suggesting a significant level of path dependence in policy terms rather than a political schism over values. This is not to say that divergent values played no part in policy choices over time or between governing coalitions, rather that such political value differences tended to be muted by the consensual nature of the political governance system.

This understanding of the Finnish polity in respect of value differences is supported by Niemelä (2008), at least for the early part of our study period covering the first half of the MDG period (2000-2008), where a fairly uniform

view of the structural or system-level causes of poverty, rather than one riven by value or interest disagreement, is detected from a cross-sectional survey of the Finnish population.

3.2 Framing wickedness

How 'wickedness' is framed, we suggest, is central to understanding the Finnish child poverty policy response. We need also to understand how complexity does, or does not, become 'wicked;' how rational-technical problems become social problems and how we can use the notion of wickedness as an explanatory, analytical, tool.

For Head and Alford (2015), 'wickedness' is manifest in terms of organisational complexity, scientific uncertainty and social pluralism, potentially rendering a policy issue difficult if not impossible to address in the traditional rational-technical manner. This formulation can be further decomposed into a framework which understands complexity in two distinct ways. Firstly, where knowledge gaps remain in terms of stakeholder and/or policymaker understanding of a practical problem, given the likelihood that no actor has access to all the required information. And secondly, where divisions exist over interests or values between stakeholders, policymakers and end-users.

In the Finnish context however the centrality of social pluralism to the manifestation of wickedness in policy terms is difficult to assess, given the structured, consensual, nature of the political system based around broad coalition governments and the existence of imbedded policy communities which tend also to function consensually (Arter, 2020).

Framing the child poverty issue in terms of wickedness thus raises interesting questions about the basis for such claims in the Finnish context. To what extent is complexity in respect of child poverty policy generated by problems associated with its multilevel governance structure and inter-agency communication failures rather than by existential differences over values and culture? And is this situation a dynamic one where change occurs over time?

Is the child poverty policy debate in Finland fundamentally characterised by the type of complexity generated by value differences? Or is the answer here rather more prosaic, relating instead to technical problems with measurement, or to implementation problems around institutional and/or governance level disputes, turf wars, knowledge gaps and siloed thinking?

To provide a data point for our policy analysis, covering the period from the early 1990s to the present, we utilise existing official datasets on child poverty as well as data on the various government agendas since 1995 (commencing with Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen's I government 1995-1999 and concluding with the government of Prime Minister Sanna Marin 2019-2023).

4. Child poverty as wicked societal problem

4.1 Child poverty as a policy continuum

The Finnish Constitution (1999) guarantees the right of those resident in Finland to adequate social and health services, basic income security and essential subsistence and care. Finnish welfare policy focuses predominantly on rights-based universal measures covering the entire population, including low-income groups, with the reduction of child poverty viewed, rhetorically, as a crucial element of sustainable social and economic development.

The level of child poverty in Finland is among the lowest in Europe. Previous analyses have indicated that this low level is due to the role played by public transfers at the bottom of the income distribution (Bradbury et al., 2019), not the high social transfers *per se* in the country. The trends in child poverty, its risk factors and its consequences are well-established in the Finnish context. For example, the level of child poverty is substantial among single adult households and increased substantially after the 1990s economic recession (Härtull et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, child poverty patterns shift rapidly and constantly. In Finland - a country with comparatively low immigration levels - child poverty is now increasingly combined with an immigrant background, clusters of social, educational and health difficulties and child welfare service needs. These

complex, multiple and interlocking disadvantages present new challenges to the 'one-size-fits-all' welfare state model built in the previous industrial era. Compounding this, low-income families face increasing difficulties in meeting their essential needs due to rising inflation caused by food and energy price spikes, impacting large families and families with a single adult in particular.

Below, we briefly examine the ways in which child poverty has been addressed in agreed coalition government programmes and, in tandem, investigate current child poverty trends in Finland. We specifically explore the extent to which these new challenges - immigration, multiple disadvantages and cost-of-living increases - are cited in these agreed coalition government programmes. Our aim is to understand how child poverty has been addressed over time by Finnish policymakers and, by extension, what types of measures have been considered effective in reducing child poverty. We do not seek to evaluate actual policy outcomes or 'effectiveness' here, focusing instead on the rationales and logics behind the declaratory policy guiding the work of the government. More comprehensive assessment of social policy, in general, and family policy development in particular, are available elsewhere (Kaarakainen et al., 2022).

Government programmes are the key declaration of aims, policies and intentions guiding policy in Finland's multiparty governance system, making them a suitable object of study. Our focus here is on the seven government programmes agreed during the period 1995-2019.

4.2 Child poverty as a metrics reality

We focus here on two key poverty measures – the income-based at-risk-of-poverty threshold and social assistance payments – and use the income-based measure to assess relative deprivation. This is a measure calculated as the percentage of children aged under 18 and living in households with incomes below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. This threshold is set each year to 60% of the median, the OECD equivalent measure of the disposable income of all households in Finland. Our second measure is the share of families receiving means-tested social assistance payments. Social assistance usage is an

administrative measure of poverty which reflects both subjective (indicated by applying) and objective (strict means testing) aspects of economic hardship. During the timeframe of our analysis there were no significant changes in eligibility for these benefits. The trends in these two measures are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

These two measures were chosen as they are widely accepted by the poverty research community, in part because they utilise the longest and most relevant time-series data available. Problems however remain in terms of measurement, particularly around indicator choice generating 'wickedness' in terms of scientific uncertainty. As such, while these two measures alone are inadequate in terms of providing the full picture of multidimensional child poverty, they continue to be used as the basis for policy discussion. Note that the colour-coding on the graphs represents the political affiliation of the Coalition's Prime Minister (red-left, green-centre, blue-right).

*** FIGURES 1 and 2 here ***

4.3 Child poverty as a policy narrative 'pendulum'

In this section we reproduce, in tabular form, the main developments in respect of the various government programmes enacted during our chosen time period. The seven government programmes outline the evolution of the Finnish national-level approach to child poverty reduction. In relation to questions over institutional complexity, the implications are threefold: (1) the lack of clear measures to monitor development, (2) the multidimensionality of the child poverty alleviation system and (3) the decentralised nature of the *implementation* system. Moreover, from the data, we can see that the policies adopted fall into one of three approaches: increasing employment, service development and benefit level uplift of the universal benefit types.

Innovative, administrative silo-busting measures were rarely discussed with traditional policy approaches dominating (Virtanen et al., 2016). This likely reflects problems with 'trust' between government departments and/or implementation levels.

*** Table 1 here ***

5. Discussion – SDGs as a learning framework in the context of child poverty?

5.1 The essence of child poverty

It is tempting to conceptualise child poverty as a classic ‘wicked problem’ echoing Head and Alford’s (2015) characterisation of wickedness. Questions however remain over the characterisation of complexity and the explanatory power of wickedness theory. For instance, Noordegraaf et al. (2019) problematise the notion of treating societal issues as necessarily ‘wicked problems’ and thus the utility of wickedness theory and in particular its practical application given the difficulty in operationalising it as a framework for practical action by those who must, on a day-to-day basis, deal with such ‘wicked’ problems. This then raises questions around definitions of child poverty based on relative economic deprivation, the risk of lifetime exclusion and the need to break this cycle.

Michael Ungar (2018) argues that to break the cycle of inter-generational poverty or other forms of exclusion, we need to negotiate with children/youth/families about the types of recourses that they themselves deem helpful in their current life situation(s), and then navigate them through the local service/benefit system. Through this process the complexity of the situation at the micro-level can be decomposed and the right street-level policy responses administered in a way that better supports family-level resilience.

Given the previous analysis, three issues emerge. First, what is the link between poverty policy output and the way in which the SDGs are administered in Finland? Second, does governance capacity remain an issue given that child poverty trends have remained static over the last 30 years,

and what mechanisms and capacities are absent in the context of child poverty and in Finnish family policy more broadly? And thirdly, how successful has the impact of multilevel service implementation been on social outcomes in respect of child poverty?

5.2 Child poverty policy output in the context of the SDGs

In regards to the link between poverty policy and the SDGs, the Finnish approach to child poverty is slowly evolving though it remains unclear what, if any, impact SDG compliance has had any on this development given Finland's general approach to social sustainability and the junior position of the MSAH as regards SDG policy coordination. Compounding this is the complicated, piecemeal, nature of the social security system, lacking coherence both institutionally and in terms of its policy outputs, given the overlaps and interdependencies between different benefit types (Kangas & Simanainen, 2021 pp6-17).

Thus, the 'wickedness' aspect of child poverty in Finland is primarily related to technical and/or institutional difficulties in the coordination of disparate policy instruments from various institutional actors at different levels. The data confirms that child poverty remains a stubborn and consistent problem, albeit one remaining at a low level by international comparison. Its increasing confinement to distinct population groups, namely, immigrant and single-parent families, is however suggestive of specific policy failure and only likely to generate further 'wickedness' outcomes.

5.3 Governance mechanisms and capacities

The problem of persistent policy failure returns us to the issue of policy coherence. Two of the SDGs primary messages are that 'change must happen everywhere' and that 'no one gets left behind.' Attainment of these outcomes is however hampered by internal contradictions generated within the SDG process, some of which are visible in the Finnish context.

Policy choices are clearly limited by the political dominance of the 'economic growth' paradigm (Utting and Zammit, 2009) promoting the multistakeholder

framework mandating public-private 'partnership'. Rather than ensuring that 'no one gets left behind' this mandates that everyone follows the same, pro-business trajectory with coherence generated by a series of targets and measurement metrics, themselves problematic (Hak et al., 2016), reducing issues of power and socioeconomic status to technical discourses around goal performance (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017). This is visible in the Finnish response to child poverty both in terms of political level consensus and in the interplay between the AROP and social assistance use statistics.

The sheer number of indicators, moreover, allows for 'cherry picking' by governments - in the context of 'change must happen everywhere' - as we see with Finland's claims on SDG 1 (PMO, 2020). More generally, the focus on individual indicator attainment can undermine coherence in policy terms as attainment in one area is not related to its potentially detrimental effects on another.

This is clearly discernible in Finland's SDG response, particularly on environmental issues where the private sector push to promote (and export) green technology involves what Berliner and Prakash (2015) term 'bluwashing' – the advancement of commercial interests under the UN flag. Although this issue is mitigated to some extent in respect of child poverty, given the low priority afforded social sustainability, tough, employment-focussed, policies such as Sipilä's 'activation model' approach do not align with the multidimensional nature of poverty and the need to address family needs as a whole.

Mainstreaming SDG adaptation is possible. The state budget is based on the administrative construct of ministries, government agencies and other regional and local level public administration organisations. Better SDG integration could be generated by re-structuring the state budget in line with the SDG's by introducing budget lines and programme funding aligned with SDG formulations – child poverty could represent one such budget line. Re-aligning the state budget to the SDG goals would help consolidate the SDGs into national policy making. This is possible, given that Finland is

experimenting with Phenomenon-based budgeting, while sustainable development has been included as a cross-sectoral theme in the state budget since 2018 (SITRA, 2018, Varis, 2020).

Alleviating child poverty in Finland clearly requires, echoing Head (2022, p. 40-6), 'new thinking.' Traditional approaches to public policymaking such as avoidance, denial and minimal responsibility, coercive controls, compartmentalised micro-management and technocratic problem-solving (through the 'evidence-based' approach) have proven insufficient. New approaches, including greater stakeholder collaboration, are required to promote collective impact at the local level, while, in addition, adopting resilience-promoting practices at the micro-level that help to decompose the inter-generational nature of child poverty.

Certain 'governance' topics clearly also merit experimentation in relation to child poverty. These include the management of *diverse responsibilities* between different governance (local, regional and national) levels and institutional arrangements (public, private, non-governmental) which clearly affect efficient policymaking. In the context of child poverty, *the role of collaboration and collective sensemaking* between government institutions, policymakers and the policy implementing agency would make visible the policy problems related to strategic atrophy, resource imprisonment and diverging commitments. It is important then *to increase strategic sensitivity among policymakers and public institutions* to explore how best to achieve this heightened ambition, knowledge input diversity, intense dialogues, flexible budgeting, modular public service structures, shared information systems, the reallocation of responsibilities and better anti-child poverty policies in practice.

5.4 Successful multilevel service delivery

Reforming social security in parallel with family services reform requires multistakeholder collaboration across the various branches within the MSAH and Kela. Reforming the family service system is though a more complicated task than previously assumed with further difficulties likely to emerge with

the introduction of the 21 new regional governance level actors now responsible for the delivery of social, health and rescue services with tasks, if not responsibilities, remaining fluid during the early stages of the reform process.

Moreover, while Finland has an extensive measurement, compliance and implementation governance system in place and already implements the multistakeholder governance model in its day-to-day business it remains unclear what impact these *fora* have on the broader recognition of child poverty as a multi-dimensional issue. It is then into this void that street-level implementors could step with new ideas and formulations, independent of both the SDG framework and the drift of national level declaratory policy.

6. Conclusions

Ending child poverty is recognised as a key facet of both poverty eradication and sustainable development. The inter-generational transmission of poverty is a key issue, as children growing up in poverty are at increased risk of experiencing a whole host of welfare problems in adulthood, including poverty itself (Schmidt et al., 2021; Duncan et al., 2010). Longitudinal research demonstrates that the inter-generational transmission of poverty introduces complexities to our understanding of the contents and dimensions of child poverty as well as hampering our ability to draw a coherent picture of the causes and consequences of this phenomenon (Ristikari et al., 2018).

As such, the 'wickedness' issue is deeply embedded at the heart of what the SDGs are, as balanced sustainable development is difficult given the role played by deregulation and liberalised social and economic policies in creating unsustainable development in the first instance (Weber, 2016; Swain, 2017). Moreover, 'wickedness' is continually generated in the meta-failure of the programme's overall coherence, where the pursuit of some SDGs materially endangers the ability to address others (Brown, 2015; Costa et al., 2021).

The salience of the child poverty issue in Finland then presents something of a complex puzzle. In national terms the issue is confined to certain groups –

which, in itself, is a direct result of the 'wickedness' flowing from the technical complexity embedded in the institutional set up and the policies it produces. While the issue is viewed as 'politically' important, featuring in most governmental programmes over our review period, public policy has had little impact on the headline figures.

Since the inception of the SDGs in 2015 moreover, this pattern has not altered significantly – there are clearly 'wicked' aspects here relating to uncertainty and disagreement – but the issues around indicators and measurement render 'solutions' difficult, particularly in the context of a welfare system which was not designed to work in the ways required to effectively address multi-dimensional child poverty. Moreover, in terms of the SDGs themselves, child poverty remains a minor issue for Finland where national attention is focused on other goals relating to development aid, education and environmental concerns.

This chapter has explored how 'rich' Nordic welfare state, Finland, has attempted to cope with the issue of child poverty since the 1990s. In conclusion, the Finnish welfare governance system, specifically, those policies addressing child poverty, suggest that it has, simply, 'come to terms' with the wickedness aspects of child poverty and effectively 'learned to cope' with internationally set targets such as those associated with the SDGs, essentially maintaining the policy status quo.

The discrepancies and asymmetries between child policy as a public policy goal and public policy intervention are clear. In the context of public policy delivery, Grube (2022) has, for instance, outlined four success factors enhancing the worth of public policy. They are relevant to the field of child poverty since they inveigh us not to understand its eradication as 'irredeemably wicked.'

Accordingly, four elements "*need to line up for governments to have a decent shot at winning the politics of policymaking in any given situation*" (Grube, 2022, p. 12). They are (ibid., p. 13-17): (i) proper *problem definition* (what is the actual problem that this policy is trying to solve? Including an

understanding of how to frame the problem and from what kind of perspective?) thus providing the frame of action for actual policymaking; (ii) the *policy narrative* needs to be consistent with the societal problem definition to help explain the policy problem in such a way that connects with service users; (iii) *data and evidence* usage that bring together the facts of what is happening in the context of the policy problem – bearing in mind the reality that evidence can never be totally objective – and finally (iv) *relevant policy interventions* which constitute the final chain of alignment that connects the policy problem definition, narrative and evidence as a change mechanism designed to solve the pinpointed policy problem. This approach represents a useful updating of Rittel and Weber's (1973) original task and could be used to develop a comprehensive approach to tackling the determinants of child poverty.

From a Finnish child poverty perspective, it is apparent that none of these public policy fundamentals have been adequately addressed. Therefore, while government interventions have been insufficient, the role, as actors, of national child welfare and family policy related non-governmental organisations has become much more important in terms of bringing the issue of child poverty into societal forums and leading debates in the media.

Anti-poverty policies related to children and families with children, need to embody different kinds of policy responses to be effective as one of the primary reasons for the shortcomings in Finnish family policy is the continuing mismatch between financial social security and the implementation, more broadly, of family services. Further problems here relate to the 'renewal policies' pursued over the past 30 years in the family policy field where the dominant trend has been to pursue service system renewal by implementing top-down 'solutions' without the ability to ensure – given the prevailing governance structure - that policies are effectively implemented at the local level. This may, in part, be addressed in the move towards the re-centralisation of service delivery, but as the new system of wellbeing counties

only came into force at the beginning of 2023 it is difficult to judge whether this will be the case.

What is apparent though is that a strong rhetorical consensus around reducing child poverty has existed, in principle, encompassing all national administrations covered in the review period. What is also clear however is that these government programme documents generally lack concrete and innovative policy measures to address child poverty in the context of family services and social security and that integration with the SDGs remains weak. Over time, piecemeal adjustments to the social security system generated sub-optimal solutions to the point where the social security system is now in need of reorganisation to better meet the challenges of child poverty and families at risk of social exclusion. In the pragmatic, consensual, Finnish context, this should *not* be a wickedly insurmountable problem.

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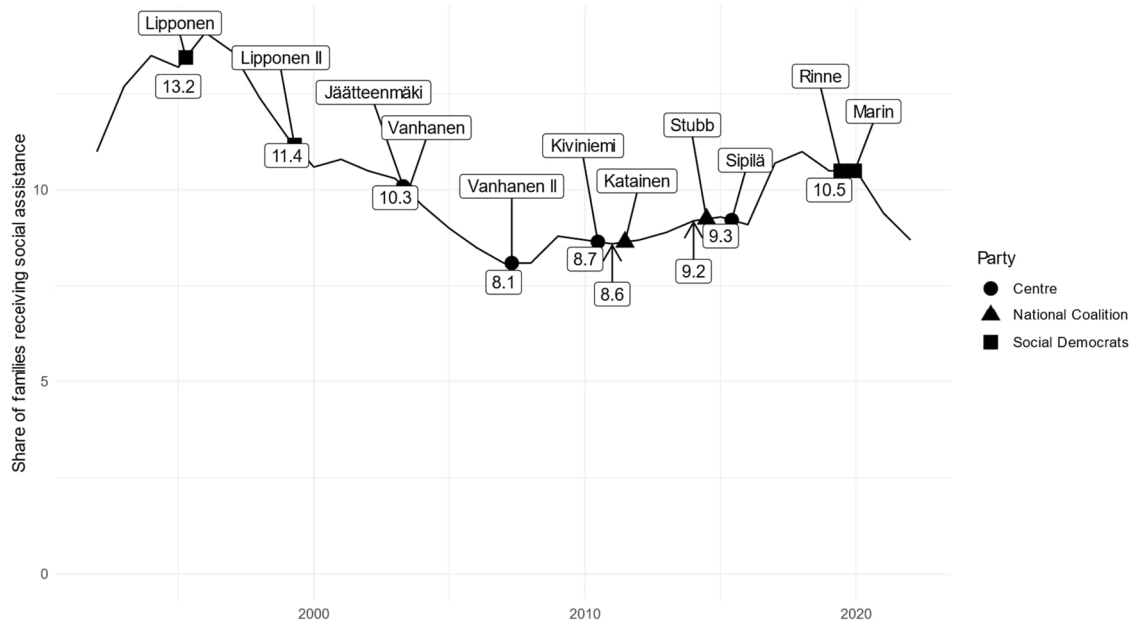


Figure 1. Social assistance usage among families with children. Source: Finnish institute for Health and Welfare (THL).

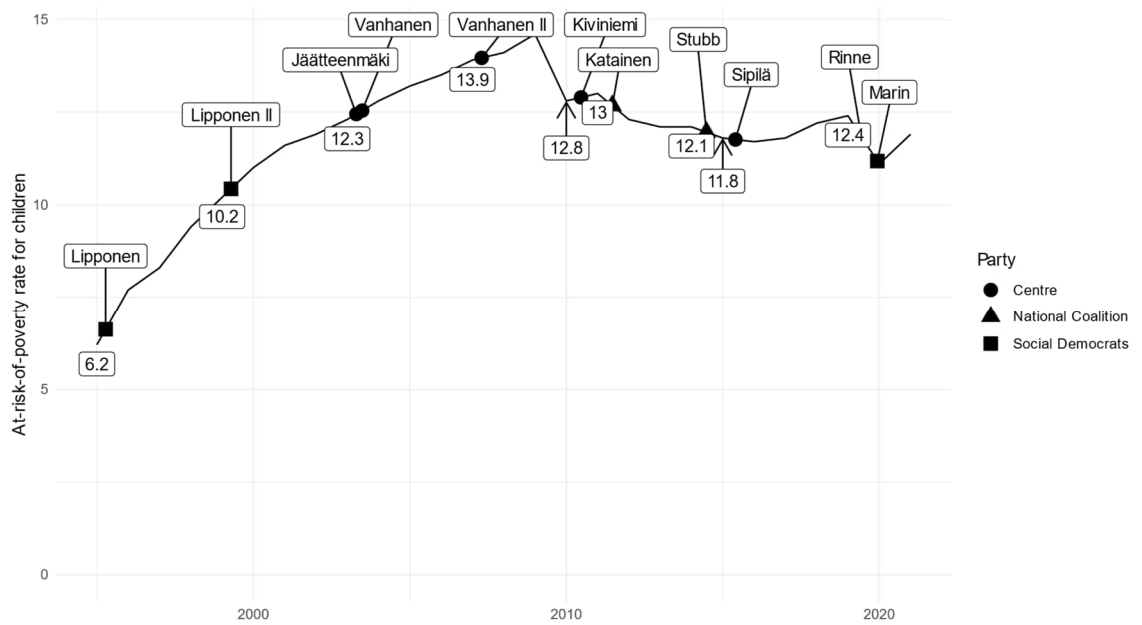


Figure 2. At-risk-of-poverty-rate for children. Source: Statistics Finland.

Table 1. Content of the government programme documents and child poverty development.

Government	Economic context	Child poverty context	Child poverty development
<i>Lipponen I</i>	A five-party 'rainbow' coalition took office in the wake of the early 1990s recession. The government programme focused on economic policy, primarily on reducing unemployment to alleviate the country's difficult fiscal position.	Little emphasis placed on the specific needs of families with children and though public service delivery issues were addressed.	The share of families receiving social assistance declined by 2.1 percentage points, probably driven by economic recovery rather than specific anti-poverty policy interventions. The income-based child poverty rate increased by 4 percentage points. Rather than declining incomes among poor families, this increase may be partly attributed to increasing median incomes which in turn increased the poverty threshold.
<i>Lipponen II</i>	Another rainbow coalition, took office in a much more optimistic economic environment. The level of unemployment had dropped sharply as the country recovered from recession.	The government programme again focused on economic policy though more emphasis was placed on poverty reduction and social exclusion. The main poverty reduction mechanism was again employment outcomes focussed. While poverty reduction, family policies and services for vulnerable sub-groups were emphasised, the economic wellbeing of families with children was not specifically addressed. Child poverty measures were taken but they did not constitute the primary policy axis.	During 'Lipponen II' the children's at-risk-of-poverty rate increased by 2.1 percentage points while social assistance usage in families declined by 1.1 percentage points.
<i>Jaätteenmäki / Vanhanen I</i>	A centre-left coalition which assumed office in buoyant economic times.	The initial programme outlined an extensive list of measures to tackle social exclusion and child poverty, including the appointment of a child ombudsman and improvements in the level of child maintenance and other family benefits. The programme specifically referenced poverty reduction and family economic wellbeing.	Progress was made. Social assistance usage was reduced by 2.2 percentage points, reaching an all-time low at 8.1% of families. However, the share of children at risk of poverty increased by 1.1 percentage points again likely reflecting increases in the at-risk-of-poverty threshold due to increasing median incomes.
<i>Vanhanen II / Kiviniemi</i>	A centre-right coalition which assumed power just before the financial crisis.	The new programme placed a smaller but still significant emphasis on child poverty. This included, child benefit uplifts and service development interventions, such as combining family services in the form of 'one-stop shop' family service centres. A separate policy programme to improve the wellbeing of children, young people and families with children was also established.	During Vanhanen II, social assistance usage increased by 0.2 percentage points while child poverty reduced by 0.9 percentage points.
<i>Katainen / Stubb</i>	A right-dominated 'rainbow' coalition assumed power with the economy still experiencing difficulty.	Katainen's government prioritised employment creation as a counter to poverty and social exclusion, promoting third-sector organisation's role in service provision. Cash benefit uplifts were granted, while low threshold services and a better balance between work and family life was supported.	Child poverty, measured by the at-risk-of-poverty measure, declined by 1.2 percentage points while social assistance usage among families with children increased by 0.6 percentage points.
<i>Sipilä</i>	<i>Sipilä</i> inherited a more pessimistic economic outlook. Reducing public debt and improving employment opportunities were prioritised.	Child poverty was not addressed in the government programme, though the inter-generational nature of social disadvantage was. Employment was the key anti-poverty focus with the	Social assistance usage increased by 1.2 percentage points while children at-risk-of-poverty increased by 0.6 percentage points.

		introduction of the 'activation model.' Family issues were addressed by focusing on service provision.	
<i>Rinne/Marin</i>	A left-dominated centre-left coalition assumed power with an improving economy though structural problems remained.	The government programme acknowledged child poverty in both its contextual and policy sections. Child poverty was addressed through increasing service provision and social benefit levels. Specific measures included a national child strategy addressing child poverty via a rights-based approach.	Around 10.5 per cent of families received social assistance while some 12.4 per cent of children were deemed, at-risk of poverty.