In 2010 more than a third of the world’s extremely poor individuals were children under the age of 13, and approximately half of children in low-income countries were living in extreme poverty (Olinto, Beegle, Sobrado & Uematsu, 2013). The numbers are staggering, and particularly concerning given abundant research indicating that almost every aspect of childhood is negatively affected by poverty (see e.g. Aber, Bennett, Conley & Li, 1997; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Guo, 1998; Haveham & Wolfe, 1994; Vleminckx & Smeeding, 2001). Indeed, the UNCRC calls for the creation of circumstances that will ensure the right to survival and development (Article 6), identity (Article 8), health (Article 24), an adequate standard of living (Article 27), education (Article 29) and protection from economic exploitation (Article 32), all of which are threatened by poverty. Thus poverty has significant importance in the context of childhood studies.

Researchers have recast how we think about poverty, especially child poverty, which has led to a change in the way in which it is defined and measured. Increasingly, poverty has been understood as a multidimensional construct (Asselin, 2009; Gordon, Nandy, Pantazis, Pemberton & Townsend, 2003; Whelan & Whelan, 1995; Wordsworth, McPeak & Feeny, 2005), but capturing how aspects of child poverty cumulate, and clearly determining what aspects of monetary poverty and non-monetary deprivations have the most effect on well-being, are not easy. Governments need to commit to reducing child poverty, alongside building expertise and improved approaches to measuring it. Indeed, understanding child poverty to the fullest possible extent is critical to its reduction. Although an adult may experience transient poverty, being in poverty during childhood can last a lifetime (children rarely receive second chances at education or a healthy start in life). As such, not only does child poverty threaten the individual
Child during childhood but it is likely to continue into adulthood and to be passed on to future generations, entrenching and even exacerbating inequality in society (Addison, Hulme & Kanbur, 2009; Hulme, 2003).

Such developments in our understanding of poverty, coupled with frustration in developing countries with promises of prosperity based on austerity and economic growth alone, has given rise to a renewed interest in an area of development policy: social protection. This consists of a range of measures that seek to protect people against extreme poverty and its effects on well-being, and to provide special protection against shocks and at vulnerable periods in the lifecycle (Devereux, Marshall, MacAskill & Pelham, 2005).

The importance that social protection has acquired is reflected in its rapid expansion throughout the world, including countries such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa (Midgley & Piachaud, 2013). Likewise, social protection has been the subject of major strategic framework papers for the post-2015 agenda, including those by the International Labour Organization (2011) and the World Bank (2012). In 2012, UNICEF presented its social-protection strategic framework, entitled Integrated Social Protection Systems: Enhancing Equity for Children. The report stated that social protection plays a vital role in strengthening the resilience of children, families and communities; achieving greater equity; and supporting national human and economic development. A key component of the report is the concept of child-sensitive social protection, which is framed by the UNCRC, particularly children’s right to social security and to an adequate standard of living. To this end, “social protection systems need to be responsive to the multiple and compounding vulnerabilities faced by children and their families” and adopt an intergenerational approach which recognises the critical role of caregivers, and the importance of addressing their broader vulnerabilities (Winder & Yablonski, 2012, p. 4).

The concept incorporates the social safety nets (i.e. non-contributory transfer programmes seeking to prevent people from falling below a certain poverty level) agenda of the 1980s with insights gained during the 1990s, such as the sustainable livelihoods approach, vulnerability analysis and the multidimensional nature of poverty (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). In other words, social protection addresses poverty in the traditional sense but incorporates research that recognises poverty as being more complex than just lacking money. Thus most definitions of social protection incorporate social aspects of poverty, such as social exclusion and the rights of the poor, and encompass actions that are also directed at social groups that are not necessarily living below the poverty line. Developing countries have increasingly adopted social protection as the framework for social policy, and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) identifies universal social protection and equity as the central goal of social policy (UNRISD, 2006; Wiman, Voipio & Ylonen, 2007).