

Child Well-Being Expert Consultation
Co-organized by UNICEF IRC / OECD / European Commission
Paris 25 to 27 May 2009

During 3 days 72 experts from 22 different countries and international organisations met to discuss the topic of indicators to assess child well-being in international perspective. Altogether we were 17 OCDE experts, 4 from UNICEF, 2 from the EC, 9 from universities from 7 different countries, 23 representing ministries or national statistics institutions, and 17 from international NGOs and other organisations.

Agenda included 9 sessions, 7 of them devoted to 1 or two presentations of outstanding experts; one session of group discussions and one summing up session. Detailed agenda is available in www.oecd.org/els/social/childwellbeing

All experts' presentations were extremely interesting, and debates at the end of each session were very enriching, although several disagreements among participants were obvious.

According to OCDE experts, states are investing huge amounts of money on their children and there are few indicators systems appropriated to evaluate outcomes of such huge investments.

Some experts placed emphasis on the need of helping states to identify and organise data collection having a consensus they are useful for policy-making. That is related to availability of more evaluative comparable measures or indicators (versus descriptive indicators). For one Swedish expert "satisfaction" measures, though evaluative, are not "reasonable political goals", and "aspiration levels should not interfere in the measure of children's lives". This same expert criticized the concept of "well-being" and proposed to use "level of living" defined as *the individual command over resources... through which she can control and consciously direct her living conditions*, which "naturally" includes positive indicators.

One OCDE expert underlined that many UNICEF indicators are advocacy relevant but "less policy relevant". This expert also stated that little is known about child determinants of subjective indicators and therefore they are not including these indicators. In fact, in a forthcoming OECD publication (*Enhancing Child Well-Being*) a chapter devoted to a new system of indicators of Children's Well-Being has already been included. The system focuses on both present and future outcomes for children.

Some participants pointed out that evaluation of child well-being should be not only relevant for policy-making, but also for children. Many experts insisted in the need of much more information about children's lives in international perspective in a systematic and continued way "beyond survival".

The concept of "subjective well-being" of children was probably the most debated and controversial. Some participants were not happy using "subjective" indicators. But what "subjectivity" of data means for different participants remained rather unclear. Many participants agreed to collect data from children and to consider children as unit of

observation. How to collect that data was controversial and some insisted in how difficult is to get good quality data from younger children. Any data provided by children is “subjective”? “Subjective” child indicators refer to “subjective feelings” of children? The difference between “subjective” instruments to collect data from children and “subjectivity” of a complex social reality was pointed out. Children’s well-being indicators is a young field of research. And different meanings of “well-being” are included in it. Additionally, it was also pointed out that the perspective of different social agents involved in child well-being should be taken into account and even included in the measurement, as components of a complex reality. It was recalled that Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976) defined as well-being including *perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of people*.

Examples were given that sometimes indicators of efficiency of the school system do not correlate with satisfaction of children with the school system.

An UNICEF representative stated that most exiting indicators do not capture emerging problems of children (i.e.: children in institutions) and that we need child well-being data that allows for micro-analysis.

An interesting point that raised a debate is the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and of child well-being. Questions were raised about intergenerational transmission of income, wealth or school results. An OECD expert presented results showing that intergenerational “mobility” may be very different when analysing income: In some countries parents’ income are extremely related to children’s (France, USA, UK, Italy), but in some others are not (Norway, Australia).

The Irish project “Giving Children a Voice” presented an innovative research method to catch what is the meaning of “well-being” among children.

Many innovative ideas and experiences were presented about measuring child well-being using “positive” indicators. One expert stated that perhaps the best predictor of children well-becoming is children’s well-being.