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International project on indicators of children's well-being

Asher Ben-Arieh

Asher Ben-Arieh is Director of the Center for Research and Public Education at the National Council for the Child in Israel. He serves as the international project coordinator.

The challenge for policy researchers and advocates is to press for the development of indicators that hold societies accountable for more than the safe warehousing of children and youth.

K. Pittman and M. Irby, at the Jerusalem workshop.

Social indicators are widely recognized as an important tool in shaping social policies. But interest in child social indicators has been slow in developing, and efforts to collect data on children have been hampered by the fact that they are regularly included only in data about households, families, or mothers; they have not themselves been the subject of observation.¹

In the last few years, some changes have occurred. There has been more active collection and publication of data specifically about children, and some major shifts in thinking about child social indicators have taken place. Four events have been important in setting a new intellectual context: the Euro-Social Childhood Program, and its major project on childhood as a sociological phenomenon; the conference on Indicators of Children's Well-Being held in November 1994 at Bethesda, Maryland; and the international project "Monitoring and Measuring Children's Well-Being," with its two international workshops, the first in Jerusalem, Israel, in January 1996 and the second in Campobasso, Italy, in June 1997.² The main conclusions of the international project members at these two workshops are reported in this article.³

The changing perspectives on child social indicators can be briefly characterized. First, although they are still important, long-used measures such as infant and child mortality rates, school enrollment rates, and percentage of children immunized are seen as insufficient to measure children's well-being beyond survival.⁴ Second, most common measures of child development have pertained to deficiencies in achievement, problem behaviors, and negative circumstances. The absence of problems or failures, however, does not necessarily mean that children are growing and achieving well. Thus, if we are to look for positive indicators of the well-being of children beyond survival, we must add new domains of enquiry to the traditional ones such as health and education, especially in the area of life skills and future well-being.

As part of the search for more thorough and accurate indicators of children's lives, experts from more than 20 countries, representing diverse disciplines (statistics, demography, social work, political science, international law, developmental psychology, economics, and community development), have joined together in an international project and have convened twice, so far, to discuss more appropriate measures of the well-being of children beyond survival.

The Jerusalem workshop

At this meeting, much time was spent in discussing possible conceptual frameworks that would permit regular and reliable measurement and monitoring.

Conceptual frameworks for measuring children's well-being

Accepting that children should be considered a separate social group is only a first step. Children and childhood can be perceived in different ways—as an age group, as a social class, and as part of an inter-generational family structure.⁵ We must, therefore, agree on the definition of children and childhood and on the different domains which comprise their well-being, including both the objective conditions for that well-being and children's subjective perceptions and experiences. Measures of well-being must be based on a conceptual framework that integrates these perspectives.

The traditional framework of children's well-being is based on "professions—services" distinctions—that is, the different domains are contingent on the interests of professional disciplines or divided according to the different social services which deal with children. In such a framework, the main domains include demography, education, health, children at risk, and juvenile activity, among others. Another conceptual framework is provided by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, which distinguishes among four major areas: survival, protection, development, and participation.⁶

An alternative framework builds upon the relationship between enabling or risk factors and outcomes.⁷ Enabling/risk factors are variables that influence the degree to which various outcomes are achieved. Many variables serve both as outcomes and as enabling factors for other outcomes. Health status is an outcome, but it facilitates many other outcomes by affecting a child's ability to participate in, or benefit from, various activities.

In this context, we must also distinguish between structural and process variables. At the level of the family, family composition or parental characteristics are structural variables, but parenting techniques constitute a process variable. At the societal level, legal provisions for employed mothers are a structural variable, but the way in which employers relate to child-rearing needs is a process variable.

In thinking about children's well-being, there exists an important distinction between concern with the present and concern with the future. From an inter-generational perspective, the child is both the progenitor of the adult and a future parent of subsequent generations of children. The link between the child and his or her adult self can find expression in a set of enabling factors that may be considered "life skills," both personal and civic. Life skills include knowledge, training, moral and social values, personality traits and habits, and ability to play an effective role in the family, the workplace, and the broader civil society.

A rationale for measurement

Participants in the Jerusalem meeting agreed that data on children should be collected not only through the household or the family but primarily by looking at the child as the unit of measurement. They also agreed that, in addition to cross-country comparisons, it is important to measure the disparity between those at the lowest rung of the economic ladder and those at the top within each country.

Even though many participants in the workshop accepted that the minefield of cross-cultural value judgments had already been crossed by the universal acceptance and ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, finding specific indicators that reflected the Convention's principles proved to be a task fraught with problems, in part because of the many compromises and deliberate "fogginess" built into it.

Almost everyone agreed on the importance of measuring the state of children's well-being beyond survival, though there were some differences of emphasis. Because issues beyond survival will vary with the child's life stage, it was also agreed that children's progress should be monitored within key transition stages from birth to adulthood, so as not to lose sight of the importance of continuous, appropriate support for development.

During workshop sessions, an effort was made to avoid the traditional areas of concern such as health, education, and economic measures. Instead, the discussion went on to issues such as children in families and communities, or children and society. Special emphasis was given to studying possible ways of measuring the development of personal and civil life skills among children, children's self-fulfillment, and costs and benefits of the lives of children. Not the least of our problems was that suggestions for specific indicators were constantly bumping heads against the low ceiling of data availability.

The process is not simply one of identifying new indicators. It requires defining outcomes beyond survival that are grounded within very different cultures and concepts of children's well-being. The complexity of this task means that we must broaden some

assumptions and avoid others. In particular, two assumptions must be re-examined: that quantitative data are better than qualitative, and that an indicator is valid only if it can be applied identically across countries. First, conducting qualitative research, one aspect of primary social research, is immensely important for measuring and understanding the state of children, including their subjective well-being. Second, if social indicators are to be a tool for change, they must be accepted as valid by those in a position to change policies and assign resources. Thus the search for indicators will need to be equally concerned about definition and measurement and about implementation, even if the resulting indicators are less "scientific."

Monitoring beyond survival requires defining a purpose. Why monitor? Who is the audience? Whom are we trying to educate, inform, persuade? To meet these wider purposes, cost-benefit analyses should be extremely broad-based. What are the costs/benefits to the family, the immediate environment/community, the dominant society/ culture, the economy? From a political perspective, decisions about investment in youth may be very much determined by who benefits and who pays. If it is perceived that youth and families benefit but the larger society pays, there may not be strong political support for diverting additional resources to youth. Furthermore, as adults, we are concerned not only with the outcomes of childhood and adolescence but also with the quality of these life stages.

Some issues to consider

Issues that emerged in the Jerusalem discussion included the following:

1. Sources of information. The diversity of children's lives means that any attempt to develop indicators of children's well-being must be built upon a range of sources. The three major ones are administrative data, censuses and surveys, and primary social research.

Administrative data may be the best option for quickly developing more timely or new community and local indicators of children's well-being.⁸ Administrative data, such as school reports, birth certificates, and child protection reports, are relatively inexpensive to gather. Census or survey data exist in all but the poorest countries, and are the main source from which context can be introduced into analysis of the well-being of children. Primary social research is necessary explicitly to address questions and gaps in our knowledge of aspects of children's lives.

2. *Costs and benefits.* Measuring and monitoring children's well-being is not cheap, although it is not necessarily more sophisticated or expensive than the measurement of other economic or social factors. Researchers must navigate between two extremes. If they devise indicators that try to capture the well-being of children in its entire complexity, they may drown in an ocean of details. If they tack the other way, looking for easily accessible, existing data when devising indicators, they may find themselves, as Robert Haven comments, looking for the coin under the lamp instead of where it really is.⁹

3. *Enhancing knowledge.* The information gained from measuring the well-being of children should not be of a descriptive, general nature only, but should increase the knowledge base, enabling us to identify specific groups of children, those who are in distress or who are deprived as well as those who are better off.
4. *Providing tools for better planning.* Measuring the state of children is the first step in planning services, programs, and policy that will better address the specific needs of different children's groups. It may provide planners with a view of children's living conditions different from that represented by adults, illuminate the relative position and needs of children in comparison to other age groups in society, and, by highlighting children's contributions, provide an "economic" rationale for investing more resources in children.
5. *Making monitoring possible.* Regular measurement and publication of data on the state of children is vital for monitoring children's well-being and for monitoring and evaluating the success and failure of policies, services, and programs that seek to improve children's lives.
6. *Enabling better evaluation.* A reliable set of indicators of the well-being of young children could enable us to set goals for any early childhood intervention program, to evaluate the program's outcomes and achievements, and to make necessary adjustments.

The Campobasso workshop

Between the Jerusalem and the Campobasso workshops, subgroups of the international study group considered hundreds of discrete indicators within a variety of frameworks for organizing a view of children's lives. Their work was the basis for extended discussions by the entire group at Campobasso. It appears that a consensus is emerging that indicators should cover the following life domains:

Social connectedness. The child's social networks include family, peer, and community groups and can be measured according to density and quality. Such factors include children's participation in and perceptions of developmentally relevant activities such as school, informal education, recreation, and information networks and the structure they and their caregivers give to their lives.

Civil life skills. In democratic cultures, children can develop social and civic responsibilities in their early years, learning cooperation and participation in their small environments and gradually expanding their contributions as citizens as their environments expand with their evolving capacities. The nature and extent of their opportunities to express themselves, to learn respect for the rights of others and to honor diversity, or to practice skills for civic life can be assessed.

Personal life skills. Children must learn skills to contribute to their own well-being, including self-esteem and assertiveness and the capacity to learn and work. These areas can be assessed through culturally relevant measures of education, developmental

resources for special needs, personal traits, work, and protection from work or educational exploitation. Also, measures can be developed to understand the economy of childhood, including children's capacity to contribute to their own economic circumstances.

Safety and physical status. Surveys of children and youth in many cultures often reveal that their primary concern is safety. Millions of children live in threatening circumstances because of family or community violence, sexual exploitation, war and civil conflict, drought and famine, or their own institutionalization, homelessness, or refugee status. Even more are at risk because of inadequate health or mental health care. Measures can determine the nature and extent of such threats and the conditions under which children feel safe. Children can also tell us about how they promote their own wellness and safety.

Children's subcultures. Across political jurisdictions and cultures, children engage in work, play, creativity, consumption, social interactions, and other activities that are analogous to adult activities yet qualitatively different. Routine measurement and monitoring of key indicators can lead to fascinating discoveries about the resemblances between children's subcultures within diverse dominant cultures, enable us to understand the lives of children from a child-centered perspective, and inform policies to enhance their self-fulfillment and life satisfaction.

An array of existing measures provides a foundation for selecting key indicators of children's well-being in these domains. Many have methodological problems that affect cross-cultural and jurisdictional comparability, and they must be adapted for international monitoring.

If social indicators are to promote child well-being beyond survival and to influence social and political change, they must raise children's stature in the policy process by emphasizing the child as a unit of observation, reflecting the child's voice and perceptions, and enabling the child's rights. To be comprehensive, they should balance measures across various domains of children's lives and be carefully constructed to include current and historically excluded sub-populations of children (e.g., those with disabilities; indigenous, minority, very poor, or isolated populations; children separated from families; homeless, migrant, refugee, or immigrant children). Quantifiable and qualitative measures are necessary to portray the range, instability, and diversity of children's experiences. They should examine disaggregated data as well as central tendencies, and should address both children's behaviors and processes and the structures of which they are a part. They should be grounded in theory and research that meets the tests of valid and reliable measurement, and in a vision of childhood as a unique and inherently valuable phase of human life, when the pace of human growth and development is more rapid than at any other time.

¹ N. Zill and C. W. Nord, *Running in Place: How American Families are Faring in a Changing Economy and an Individualistic Society* (Washington, D.C.: Child Trends, Inc., 1994); A. BenArieh, *The State of the Child in Israel—A Statistical Abstract* (in English)

(Jerusalem : The National Council for the Child, 1992, 1994); A. M. Jensen and A. Saporiti, *Do Children Count?* (Vienna: EuroSocial, 1992).

² J. Qvortrup, *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon: An Introduction to a Series of National Reports* (Vienna: EuroSocial, 1990); J. Qvortrup, *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon: Lessons from an International Project*, (Vienna: EuroSocial, 1993). The conference on Indicators of Children's Well-Being, for which IRP was a sponsor and organizer, is described in *Focus* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 1–30 and has resulted in a published volume (see p. 67).

³ The project is still under way. A third and concluding workshop will take place at the end of 1998 in the United States

⁴ J. L. Aber, "Measuring Child Poverty for Use in Comparative Policy Analysis" and K. Pittman and M. Irby, "Promoting Investment in Life Skills: Beyond Indicators for Survival and Problem Prevention," both in *Monitoring and Measuring the State of Children*.

⁵ T. Dolev and J. Habib, "A Conceptual Framework for Efforts to Develop Indicators of the Child in Society," in *Monitoring and Measuring the State of Children*.

⁶ A. B. Andrews and N. K. Kaufman, eds., *The Child's Right to a Standard of Living Adequate for Development* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, forthcoming).

⁷ T. Dolev and J. Habib, "A Conceptual Framework."

⁸ R. M. Goerge, "Potentials and Problems in Developing Indicators of Child Well-Being from Administrative Data," in R. M. Hauser, B. V. Brown, and W. Prosser, eds. *Indicators of Children's Well-Being* (New York: Russell Sage, 1997), and "The Uses of Administrative Data in Measuring the State of Children," in *Monitoring and Measuring the State of Children*.

⁹ R. Haveman, "Assessing Children's Well-Being: How Many and Which Indicators, and at What Cost?" in *Indicators of Children's Well-Being: Conference Papers*, Vol. 1, IRP Special Report 60a, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1995.