Comments on the conference papers

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I found both papers to be comprehensive and careful treatments of their subjects: North-South migration, and South-South migration. In particular, I appreciated and found very helpful the discussions of data sources and their coverage.

My comments are restricted to the paper by Harttgen and Klasen, and indeed to only one particular part of that paper: the discussion of migration and well-being of children and youth. I wish to add a discussion of this issue that takes the same starting point as the authors, namely the framework of Sen, but ends up in a different place. In particular, I would suggest that when Sen’s perspective is pushed through a filter of child development it asks us to focus on what I will call equality of opportunity (rather than social inclusion), and then leads to a different set of indicators—a more dynamic set—that may complement those posed in the paper.

However, before detailing this case I would suggest that it was not immediately apparent to the reader why the paper chose to focus on children and youth in Europe. The title explicitly suggests that the topic is restricted to Europe, and while the body of the paper does use this vocabulary a good deal of the substance does include the United States, or at least this country is cited as a counterpoint or complement. It is true that the discussion of social inclusion is explicitly a European discourse, but this need not limit the subject matter of the paper.

In addition, I suspect that the stated goal of the authors—to offer a European survey—limits them from making more explicit reference to Canada. The Canadian case can be very fruitful in a comparative research agenda as the country’s experience with immigration stands out as a success story. The nature of immigration and the outcomes of immigrants and their children are very different than other experiences in both North America and Europe, and if it were more explicitly addressed may offer interesting questions and perspectives. Certainly in all recent OECD comparative studies, in particular those using the PISA data, children of migrants to Canada have superior outcomes. This should be something that an international community of analysts will want to be aware and make use of.

In addition, because of the importance of immigration to Canada there is a rich set of micro level of data that can serve as the basis for comparative analysis or prototypes for future development. I feel it important to make these explicit. They include but are not limited to the following. The first is an expanded sample of the PISA data that is integrated into a longitudinal survey of youth making their transition from the teen to the young adult years. The sample sizes are very large, over 20,000 if memory serves...
correctly, so that these data can offer reasonable estimates at the provincial level, which is important as education is in this federal country a provincial responsibility. This survey is called the Youth in Transition Survey (or YITS) by Statistics Canada. The second is a longitudinal survey of immigrants carried out since 2000, and called the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants (or LSIC). A cohort of immigrants were interviewed six months after arrival, and followed every two years for three waves. It is not clear if this survey will continue in the field, and it is not clear the extent to which there is a good deal of child specific content, but there is some and the content can serve as a model for future discussion. The third is the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, a longitudinal survey of children from birth through the teen years, with information on immigrant origin. Though the immigrant sample is somewhat limited this survey is particularly strong in offering measures of child well-being across a host of domains, and includes surveys of parents and schools as a part of the design. The fourth and final are the micro data associated with the so-called “long form” of the Canadian Census, a one-in-five sample of the entire population. These data are important in that the sample is very large (5 to 6 million observations) permitting the development of detailed information on immigrant status, country of origin, and the characteristics of immigrant communities.

All this is to say that the authors might consider more explicitly incorporating North America in their discussion, and to caution them to distinguish the situation in the US from that of Canada.

I found the motivation of the indicators discussion in terms of Sen’s work very helpful. Indeed, it is striking that children are rather infrequently mentioned by Sen, at least in Development as Freedom, given that a discussion of capabilities, functionings, and “leading the life that one chooses to value” is a dynamic process and would naturally refer to children who are in the process of continually developing their capabilities. At the risk of doing an injustice to Sen, it might be suggested that a focus on functionings and capabilities can also be interpreted as “equality of opportunity.” If children are to become all that they can be, that is if they are to reach their full potential, then their future outcomes should not be strongly tied to their family background or in some sense predetermined by the accident of birth or the accident of migration.

I realize that the European discourse on matters of this sort is framed around words like “social inclusion” or “social exclusion,” but these words do not necessarily have a strong resonance among the general public nor do they resonate in North American discourse. More importantly I am not certain how directly these words offer a window into the child development literature. On the other hand, if we think of Sen’s message as having something to do with equal opportunities we are asked to think in terms of developing an additional set of indicators that might link up more directly with this literature. In addition, “equality of opportunity” may have a more immediate public policy resonance, speaking as it does to an inherent sense of fairness readily appreciated by policy makers and the general public.
This said, there is certainly a good deal of ambiguity as to what “equality of opportunity” might mean. John Roemer defines equality of opportunity as meaning that inequities of outcome are not defensible when they are the result of different ‘circumstances’. The catch of course is to define what we mean by ‘circumstances.’ To paraphrase Roemer, we can imagine a policy maker who believes in equality of opportunity as attempting to level any one of three successively broader fields according to the appropriate definition of ‘circumstances’. The policy maker could seek: firstly, to eliminate the influence of social connections and family income in facilitating access to health care, education, and jobs; or secondly, to eliminate the influence of parental investments (time and money) that develop skills, beliefs, and motivation among children; or finally to eliminate the genetic transmission of ability. Most reasonable observers in the developed countries may well agree that we do not wish to live in societies characterized by nepotism, nor do we want to live in societies in which the state seeks equality of outcomes. But that still leaves a good deal of space as to how this concept can guide public policy, and different societies will draw the line differently; all of this saying nothing about the effectiveness of intervention.

The point is to suggest that in constructing indicators for the impact of migration on children we need not get involved in a debate on just what equality of opportunity means. But it does point us to look at the impact that family and social investments have on the development of children at each stage of their life, to ask whether the gradients between child outcomes and the socio-economic status of parents are severe or flat, and where immigrant children fit in these gradients.

We can rely on the child development literature to suggest that a recursive process governs a child’s progression from the earliest days to final labour market and health outcomes. A crude synthesis of this might look something like:

- socio-economic circumstances early in life →
- birth weight and cognitive/social/emotional development →
- readiness to learn →
- language development →
- problems in school and educational achievement →
- skills and mental well-being in adulthood →
- labour market success and job characteristics →
- stress, disability, mortality

This is a dynamic process, but it does not necessarily require longitudinal data in the traditional sense. Samples on different cohorts of people with some retrospective information would do the trick. The indicators of “equality of opportunity” would be a series of gradients at each crucial transition in life between the outcomes relevant for well-being at that stage related to previous outcomes, and if possible to family background. Migration history would be an essential indicator if we are to forge a link between this literature and the migration literature, but we also require ultimately some information on the socio-economic status of parents.
The steeper the gradients and the more disadvantaged the migrant population relative to others of equal socio-economic status, the more concerned a policy maker might become. These are inherently dynamic, not in their construction, but in the perspective they offer, and the authors of the paper might consider a framework that leads to measures of this sort as complementing the framework and indicators they are proposing in the current draft.