Well-Being of Migrant Children and Youth: Future Directions

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My suggestions for future priorities in research on children and migrant youth reflect the points made in my comments on the coverage and content of the two review papers. They start with the need for clarity in definition of the concepts and areas of interest, before turning to how best to proceed to capture core dimensions of well-being for children and youth affected by migration, and point to some other issues to be kept in mind.

Coverage and Definitions
A clear conceptual and definitional starting-point setting out what is meant by “children and youth affected by migration” is required before the programme can proceed much further. The first issue requiring clarification relates to whether the migration involved is purely that which involves crossing an international border, or whether internal migration is to be included. A very broad definition, including internal as well as international, could certainly be adopted, but the advantages and disadvantages of a more versus less restrictive definition/coverage need to be carefully thought out, in the light of the core objectives and concerns of the programme. If internal migration is to be included, the issue of how it is to be defined (much less measured) in a consistent fashion across countries has to be decided – including whether short-term/seasonal migration is included. (The danger is that all families moving from one part of a country to another could be included, but by no means all would be a source of welfare concern – e.g. the government official moving from one regional posting to another with his or her family.) This can only be done by careful delineation of the core concerns and objectives of the programme of research and related activities. My own tentative view is that the broader scope that goes with inclusion of internal migration comes at a very real cost in terms of difficulties in focus and coherence, as well as major measurement/empirical challenges, and that a strictly cross-border focus might be preferable at least initially.
A secondary focus on “second-generation migrants” may also be considered desirable, but the definitional problems then become even more pressing: children/youth of a parent who has migrated would be one definition, but would perhaps be broader than desirable. One could restrict the focus to where both parents have migrated?

If the concern is with “children and youth affected by migration”, it will also be necessary to clarify how broadly that is to be viewed. Many children/youth in both North and South will be affected by migration even if neither they nor one or both of their parents has migrated (via the impact of migrants on local labour market opportunities for “natives” and on the local environment, including schools, in which they are brought up). One might be happy to restrict attention to those directly affected by migration, but even there it is not obvious that the focus should be solely on cases where children/youth or their parents have migrated – what about cases where one or more older siblings have migrated and are sending back remittances which have a major impact on the household/children’s living standards?

The next conceptual/definitional issue is whether/how to categorise children/youth affected by migration geographically. If a developed/developing country, North/South categorisation is to be employed, is the distinction to be based on where the children are living or where the migration is to/from? Is it children located in developed versus developing countries who are affected by migration, irrespective of whether that migration is South-South or South-North, or is the distinction to be based on whether the migration is South-South or South-North?

A related question is whether one can distinguish and set out some core distinct groups of policy concern, as a way of organising thinking/research and motivating policy-makers. These might include, for example, such categories as:

- Youth who have migrated alone, legally and willingly;
- Children/youth who have migrated legally with parent/parents;
- Children/youth who have migrated alone, without family, unwillingly;
- Children of illegal undetected migrants;
• Children of illegal migrants in detention
• Youth who have migrated alone and illegally
• Children who have one parent migrated and one with them in the household
• Children “left behind” when both parents migrated – distinguishing those in receipt of remittances and those not in receipt;
• Children who are living with parents, neither of whom has migrated, but the household receives remittances from other relatives who have migrated

Capturing Well-being
The priority for the programme is to be able to capture and understand the well-being of children and youth affected by migration. There is now a quite substantial body of research, activity and data which focuses on capturing and monitoring child well-being in developed countries, including on a cross-country comparative basis, notably that led by UNICEF’s Innocenti Centre, as well as in country-specific studies. A great deal can be learned from these exercises in terms of what the key dimensions of well-being are, what it has proved possible to monitor for the general population, and what has been learned from these about the variation in measured well-being of children across countries. As far as children/youth in developed countries are concerned, this provides a framework within which the situation of children/youth affected by migration can be set, data gaps can be identified, and efforts to fill those gaps can be structured.

One point of departure, for example, could be the study by Bradshaw and colleagues for UNICEF bringing together data for 21 developed countries on 40 separate indicators relating to what are identified as six core dimensions of well-being for children and youth – material deprivation, health and safety, education, relationships, behaviour and lifestyles, and subjective well-being. Similar exercises produced for individual countries can also be used to inform the way the dimensions and indicators are framed. These draw on sub-literatures on the various distinct dimensions identified as being key for children and youth, but are of course constrained by the data available. Despite these very real constraints, the comparative studies demonstrate how much can be achieved to allow meaningful comparisons.
To advance the programme of work focused on developed countries, the next step required is to see to what extent migrant children and youth can be put into these frameworks that have already been developed and implemented to capture and monitor child well-being in those countries. The first thing this would reveal is that there are many data gaps and problems, notably in the capacity to distinguish migrant children; however, the aim would be to do so in a framework where those gaps could be highlighted and addressed systematically. The overarching goal in doing so would be to see how best to make progress towards a situation where migrant children and youth could be identified and compared with other children in the society in question in regular official data collection and monitoring of child well-being. This would provide a base for research on the causal processes underpinning their distinctive situation, and on the variation across countries in that distinctiveness and the factors creating it. It would also greatly facilitate monitoring of progress and targeting of resources in the context of policy formation, allowing children affected by migration to be incorporated as a distinct “vulnerable group” into the national social inclusion strategies which all European Union countries are obliged to develop and anti-poverty strategies in other countries.

In both a developed and a developing country context, a clear priority is to tease out how regular data collection systems could be improved to capture key concerns relating to the impact of migration on children and youth – what are the priorities in terms of key gaps, and what are the practical possibilities and real-world “best bets” for significantly improving data availability, particularly in a harmonised way. How best to advance on this front and how to have maximum impact on official data-gathering practice – both national and inter/multi-national - is critical. In-depth engagement with for example the relevant UN organisations and statistical bodies is clearly required, but the focus, coverage and key concerns underpinning the enterprise must first be clarified and agreed. One would need to also think about dimensions and indicators of well-being that are of specific relevance to migrant children and youth, which could be seen as complementary to the inclusion of that group in broader well-being monitoring.
Another priority in expanding on the ground covered so far relating to developed countries is to broaden from Europe to encompass the experience of the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, countries with long histories of in-migration and substantial research literatures on the topic.

**Other Issues for Future Development**

It would also be very useful to think through what it would mean to take the perspective of migrant children and youth as the central focus of analysis when considering different theoretical approaches to understanding migration. What are the implications of the different theoretical perspectives on what drives migration for the role of and impact on children and youth? For example, from different theoretical perspectives how much would we expect migration to comprise individual young persons with no child dependents versus families?

It is also important to think about the implications of emerging or anticipated changes in the pattern of migration for children and youth. For example, if developed countries are increasingly seeking to attract skilled migrants and keep out unskilled ones, what are the implications, in particular for children and youth? The related question in terms of policy is of course whether developed countries can actually control the scale and nature of migration. Is the impact of focusing on legal admission of skilled migrants only to drive unskilled migration underground – and what implications does that have for the well-being of children both proximately (in terms for example of limited access to services, low pay/income) and in the longer-term (lack of integration, barriers to intergenerational mobility…). While this relates to the position of children of “undetected” illegal migrants, the situation of those who have been detected and are in detention is also a major concern from a welfare point of view and requires serious comparative research.

The reviews bring out the complexity of the channels whereby the impact of migration is felt and by implication the variety of the overall impact migration will have on the children and youth affected. The next step is to identify the key factors or structural/contextual determining whether the impact on children is positive or negative,
and the further stage required is to the implications for policy, both national and cross-
national. The effects of migration are clearly context-specific: the next step must be to 
tease out what this really means in a coherent and comprehensive analytical framework. 
Providing this framework would be the first critical contribution this project could make.

Finally, both reviews focus mostly on living standards/well-being of children and youth 
affected by migration, whereas the background paper by Tienda, Taylor and Maugham 
also highlights the capacity of migrants to contribute to the host country. If skilled 
migrants both do well and make a significant contribution to the host country, that is a 
“win-win” for them and the host, though be a real loss to the “sending” country that may 
not be adequately compensated by remittances. On the face of it unskilled migrants, by 
contrast, are much less of a loss to the sending country but also may make much less 
contribution to recipient country. However, developed countries accepting unskilled 
migrants in the past are seen to have benefitted in terms of economic growth: the current 
preoccupation with selecting skilled migrants may be partial or misguided. This is linked 
to prospects for intergenerational mobility versus being trapped in spatial or ethnic 
ghettos that also of course have major implications for welfare, but the “capacity to 
contribute” side of the coin and how best to maximise it also merit serious attention.