Comments by Brian Nolan on

“Well-Being of Migrant Children and Youth in Europe” by K. Hartgen and S. Klasen

The stated aim of this review paper, as outlined in the background paper by Tienda, Taylor and Maugham, is to assess the state of existing knowledge on child and youth migration in developed countries, to bring out in particular what topics have been explored most extensively and which remain understudied; whether there is adequate data to evaluate how child and youth migrants are faring, and who are leading researchers in the field. The review paper presents a great deal of interesting material, but to my mind still left unanswered some of the core questions outlined in the background paper.

The first decision made in preparing the review – clearly in consultation with the organisers – was to concentrate it on Europe. While the rationale for doing so is not entirely clear this certainly makes the exercise much more manageable, but at considerable cost. The experience of developed countries with long histories of immigration – USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand – and with substantial research literatures on the topic are missed. So while the background paper talks about this review dealing with “the North” and the other review by Rossi dealing with “the South”, what this paper sets out to provide can only be seen as a rather partial picture of the North.

The focus and balance of the paper is the next issue on which I would comment. A substantial proportion of the paper is taken up with discussing research, underlying processes and data that do not relate to the core group of interest, children and youth; even more broadly, the paper does not adopt and stick to as clear a focus as it might have. The review of different theories of migration, the discussion of the relationship between migration and economic development, and the description of European migration trends are interesting as background but not are not central to the stated focus of the paper on “the perspective of migrant children and youth as the central focus of analysis” (p. 3). Indeed, only quite a small proportion of the review could be said to deal with issues and research with that central focus. This may indeed reflect the paucity of knowledge,
research and data on migrant children and youth, but the consequence is that much of the material actually covered and presented seems of secondary relevance to the stated central aim of the review.

This continues to be the case when the paper turns from migration to the conceptualisation and measurement of child well-being. It devotes most of its discussion here to a general discussion of the literature on how well-being is to be thought of, what represent core dimensions of well-being and how those might be identified, and how specific indicators might be used to capture those dimensions. This is nicely done, but not focused on children and youth. Indeed, the paper says in conclusion that “much of the well-being literature is largely focused on adults and needs to be extended to children … the basic framework could (and probably should) be the capability approach that would then need to be extended [to children].” But there is in fact a quite substantial body of research, official activity and data which focuses directly on capturing and monitoring child well-being in developed countries. On a cross-country comparative basis perhaps the most important is the programme of work organised by UNICEF’s Innocenti Centre, as exemplified most importantly in “An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries”, Innocenti Research Centre Report Card 7, 2007. There, Jonathan Bradshaw and colleagues bring 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. As well as bringing together data from a variety of cross-country sources, this draws on a literature on child-well-being to which Bradshaw has made a significant contribution, as have for example Asher Ben-Arieh and colleagues. Similar exercises, either once-off or regular, have also been produced for a variety of individual countries in recent years, notably “The Well-being of Children in the UK” and “America’s Children: Key National Indicators” in the USA.

A great deal can be learned from these exercises in terms of what the key dimensions for child 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 developed countries. There are also important sub-literatures on the
different dimensions focused on children – for example on child poverty and material
depprivation (notably in work by Corak and by Jenkins and Micklewright for UNICEF and
by the UK Department of Work and Pensions in developing measures incorporating
income and non-monetary indicators), on child health, education etc.

A key priority in advancing the programme of work launched by the review paper - and a
major exercise in itself - would be to see to what extent migrant children and youth can
be put into the framework(s) that have already been developed and implemented to
capture and monitor child well-being in developed countries, and compared with other
children in those countries. This would reveal the many data gaps and problems that
undoubtedly exist, notably in the capacity to distinguish migrant children, but in a
framework where those gaps could be addressed systematically.

It might also be necessary to consider whether there are in addition some dimensions or
indicators of specific relevance to migrant children and youth, but that would be
secondary to fitting those children within a broader framework being applied to all
children.

Some more specific points about different parts of the review may also be made. In
describing the European “migration system”, some more detail on the way
legal/regulatory controls on migration affect children/youth in particular would be useful,
give the critical role this presumably plays in patterns of migration - certainly in the
breakdown of that migration into legal versus illegal. For example, the different
approaches countries take to family reunification as a qualifying condition for legal
migration have major implications for children and youth.

The discussion on migration and economic development (Section 2.3) may need to be
developed somewhat if it is regarded as an important aspect of the scope of the review –
otherwise it could be dropped and left to the other review or future work. The discussion
on the impact of migration on receiving countries gives a very benign picture – one could
wonder if the impact is so unambiguously positive, why is there so much debate and popular concern about migration in those countries? Perhaps this is partly because the discussion here is very much based on the economics literature – a sociological perspective may help to explain the political salience of migration in many European countries.

The intergenerational perspective is arguably even more important than the review conveys. Both migrants themselves and the countries that receive them might be happy to accept a first generation of immigrants doing mostly unskilled jobs if they could be reasonably confident most of the second generation would integrate and many would experience significant upward mobility. It may be the perception and fear of the second generation being trapped in physical and social/psychological ghettoes that underpins much of the concern about immigration among electorates in developed countries.

In discussion of European migration patterns, some more discussion of the impact of the 2004 enlargement of the EU, and indeed possible future enlargements, might have been useful.

In Table 4 p. 22, it would be helpful to state how the migrant stock figures are defined and measured. On p. 24-25 it might be useful to discuss whether “foreign born” is a good measure of “migrant”, and also whether the Labour Force Surveys are likely to be reliable as a source for data on migrants (since they may be hard to capture in sampling frames and in fieldwork, even if legal).

Is it possible to give an approximate picture of the balance of migration in Europe into economic migrants, family reunification etc.? One does not get much from this picture of migration in Europe that relates to children and youth.

The paper places a lot of emphasis on the demographic gap in Europe as a rationale for favouring immigration – but is there any evidence about the extent to which that is actually driving policy towards migration in different countries? It might also be
interesting to speculate about the potential impact of receiving countries seeking to concentrate on educated/skilled migrants.

In discussing the framework for monitoring well-being, some justification is needed for the particular dimensions/indicators presented on pp. 35-36. Once again it would seem more helpful to start with the available studies/exercises focused on child well-being in developed countries and use these as the point of departure.

In discussing potential data sources (pp. 50-55), it would be helpful in each case to set out to what extent and exactly how a/ migrants and b/ children and youth affected by migration could currently be distinguished, as a foundation for exploring how that could be improved in the future (in an EU context, most importantly in EU-SILC). The dimensions of well-being captured in each source could then be explored.
Comments on “The Impact of Migration on Children in Developing Countries” by Andrea Rossi

The stated aim of this review paper, as outlined in the background paper by Tienda, Taylor and Maugham, is to assess the state of existing knowledge on child and youth migration in developing countries, to bring out in particular what topics have been explored most extensively and which remain understudied; whether there is adequate data to evaluate how child and youth migrants are faring, and who are leading researchers in the field. The title of the review paper itself is consistent with that focus. However, the introductory paragraphs give a different impression, highlighting the neglect of South-South migration in the research literature and policy debate and the potential to learn from deeper analysis of such migration. This raises the first issue on focus requiring clarification: is this to be on children located in developing countries who are affected by migration irrespective of whether that migration is South-South or South-North, as much of the discussion suggests, or is it to be about South-South migration and its impact on children, as other parts appear to suggest?

The second issue in terms of focus and requiring clarification also relates to the migration involved, but now on whether this has to be cross-border or whether internal migration is to be included. The discussion in Section 1.4 states that a very broad definition, including internal as well as international – whether it be permanent/long/term/short-term/seasonal – is being adopted. However throughout the remainder of the paper the reader is uncertain as to whether this has been followed through, with the impression conveyed at certain points that the scope is more limited. Section 4.1, for example, focuses on children in developing countries who have migrated from other developing countries, whereas 4.2 in discussing the effects of migration on health encompasses rural-urban within countries; this may be because data is not be available for the issues addressed in 4.1, but the inclusion/inclusion of internal migration remains in need of clarification (and if it is to be included, exactly what constitutes internal migration then needs clear definition – is the interest purely in rural-urban migration?)
As well as in the focus and coverage of the paper, clarity about the definition of “left behind”, migrant etc. is also required in describing the findings of the existing literature. For example, on p. 13 some estimates are quoted for the number of children left behind, in migrant households, with one or two migrant parents, etc. but it is not clear what being “left behind” or “migrant” means in the quoted studies. Similarly, in reviewing the literature on remittances it is not clear whether the studies discussed adopted a similar definition of what constituted remittances and the households/children affected.

The review in Section 2 of available literature on children “left behind” in developing countries and the impact of migration on their circumstances is very valuable. It is particularly useful in bringing 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 depending on what type of migration is involved, what skills etc. the migrants have, family circumstances, the receiving country’s economy and institutions, whether tight linkages with the country of origin are maintained, etc.

In the discussion of the costs and benefits of migration for children “left behind”, the latter almost seems to be used as if it implied “receiving remittances” – but what about a/ where the parent(s) migrate but don’t send remittances, versus b/ where the parents haven’t migrated but someone else (older offspring) have and send remittances?

In discussing data availability and gaps, the review paper has some very useful pointers for future data-gathering exercises focused specifically on migration that would help to underpin research and advance knowledge. However, it does not give a clear picture of 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.

The intergenerational focus has a very prominent place in discussions of migration to or within North, seems much less in context of migration and South – it might be worth
considering to what extent this is a reflection of limited data availability versus the very
different nature of the processes comparing South-North versus South-South migration.

It is worth noting that both this and the Hartgen/Klasen review focus mostly on living
standards/well-being of children and youth affected by migration – and not very much on
an issue that features quite prominently in the background paper by Tienda, Taylor and
Maughan, namely 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
ghettoes 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.