Bellagio Workshop on Migrant Youth and Children of Migrants in a Globalized World: Comments on the Background Papers by Peter Saunders

General

I enjoyed reading the papers by Kenneth Halttgen and Stephan Klasen (H-K) and Andrea Rossi (AR) and learnt a lot from each of them. Together, they provide a valuable survey of the issues related to the extent and impact of migration on children and youth (hereafter C&Y), identify the limitations of existing research and suggest ways forward. The focus of the two papers is on European and South-South migration, respectively, with the consequence that three of the major immigrant countries (Australia, Canada and the United States) are not included (although studies on these countries are mentioned). This is a pity, in my view, as there are important lessons to be drawn from these countries, and it raises important questions about the geographic categories appropriate to the current project.

Before addressing each paper in detail, I want to make some remarks that apply to both of them and to the project more generally.

Defining migration: Both papers focus on international (cross-border) migration, although AR notes at several points that the impact of internal migration on children can be at least as important those associated with international migration. I agree, and would like to see more emphasis given to the impact on children of family migration of all forms, internal as well as international. It is worth observing in this context that many international migrants also migrate internally after settlement (particularly in Australia, where settlement dispersion is actively encouraged by the immigration points system and forces new migrants to locate initially in places that they would not themselves choose.)

Identifying children: I am not so much concerned here about age ranges but about the scope of the analysis. Much of the H-K paper focuses on the children whose families migrate, yet as AR notes (p.9) that there can also be impacts on the children left behind as well as those living in the country of settlement. There is no doubt that Australia’s adjustment to its (relatively recent) rejection of the ‘White Australia Policy’ has been facilitated by the acceptance of diversity that migration has brought, particularly to native Australian children who interact in schools with overseas-born pupils. There is also the issue – familiar to a large, long-term immigrant country like Australia - that many of the children of even first generation immigrant parents were born in Australia (but may have overseas-born siblings). These children do not fit the country of birth/country of residence definition of migrants but form part of the migrant population. In order to understand these differences, we need to include age at migration as another key variable in the analysis.

Identifying impacts: The key issue here relates to the counterfactual and both papers address this issue. To me, it revolves around whether one conceives of migrant children (and youth) as a specific category of migrants, or as a specific category of children (and youth). Whereas the former approach lends itself to a comparison with the source country, while the latter places the destination country firmly at the centre. From the perspective of many children (possibly less so for youth) the relevant comparison is with their peers in the destination country, and the outcome measures must reflect this.

Need for a child-focused perspective: One of the most compelling weaknesses of the existing literature is that it rarely takes a child focused approach, concentrating
instead on identifying and examining the circumstances of children from an essentially adult perspective – by adding relevant ‘child (youth) variables into existing data sets that largely describe the circumstances of adults and/or households. The H-K paper, for example restricts itself to discussing ‘voluntary migrants’ (p. 5), but this is defined from the perspective of adults not that of children, who will often be compelled to migrate against their will. We need to think about how to capture the effects as children themselves perceive them if we really want to understand how immigration effects children. This will generally not involve adding extra dimensions to existing household data, but using qualitative techniques to a larger extent.

Need for more qualitative data: The lack of emphasis given to the need for more and better qualitative data is my main concern about both papers (and of the literatures that they review). The topic lends itself naturally to the adoption of a qualitative approach both because of its emphasis on children, and because of the need to understand the processes, relationships and attitudes that shape the well-being outcomes.

Specific Comments: Harttgen and Klasen

Like John Micklewright (I tried not to read his comments before writing my own but could not resist the temptation!) I found the paper hard to follow at times and in need of some road-mapping for the reader, setting out in the beginning where we are heading and reminding us along the way where we have been. Despite this, the paper has many strengths, including the discussion of theories of migration, the role and importance of social networks in facilitating the settlement process (contributing to chain migration, as established destinations become increasingly attractive to new waves of source-country immigrants), and the discussion of well-being indicators that draws on Klasen’s own work.

I think that the authors over-state the role that immigration can play in dealing with Europe’s demographic problems. This topic has been studied extensively in Australia and it is now widely accepted that migration will only affect demographic dependency ratios if it proceeds at an accelerating rate that leads, in the equilibrium state, to an immigrant population that is so large that it raises questions about the ability of the country to absorb it. Studies have shown, for example that ‘if we want to maintain the proportion of the population aged 65 years and over at its present level, then impossibly large immigration intakes would be required (McDonald and Kippen, 1999).

I was also confused by the claim (p. 15) that for young migrants ‘their contribution [to social welfare systems] exceeds their benefits’: while it is true that younger migrants will contribute more through taxes and social contributions than older migrants, it is less obvious that their contributions will exceed their benefits, unless this is true of young people in general – in which case it reflects on the financial status of the schemes rather than the impact of migration on them. Against this, I agree very strongly with the need to ensure that migrant workers and their children can integrate successfully, not only to promote their well-being (an intrinsic goal) but also to ensure that they remain as residents and thus as contributors to social programs (an instrumental goal). Australia has devoted considerable effort into providing a range of programs designed to assist new migrants with the settlement and assimilation processes. These have had beneficial effects on migrants and, indirectly on their children.
The discussion of migration and poverty (pp. 17-18) raise several important issues, including the how the relevant comparison points are likely to differ between adult migrants and their children. However, one limitation of the standard poverty approach is its very superficial treatment of children (as 0.X ‘equivalent adults’ where the size of X is a matter of great debate, and where the issue of intra-household distribution of resources is assumed away). H-K provide a convincing case for adopting an outcome-focused approach that has the ability to identify indicators that relate specifically to children, and this is essential in any research that purports to give emphasis to the circumstances of, and impacts on, children (and youth). The approach they prefer is based on Sen’s concepts of functioning and capability and they argue (p. 35) that ‘child well-being (including agency) in the way conceptualised using the capability approach will be a multidimensional concept that will consider education, health, economic well-being, opportunities for social integration, and the ability to shape one’s life and surroundings’. It is worth noting that the items listed here correspond to those identified in the Rossi paper (p. 6) as contributing to the well-being of children.

Of course, the capability approach encounters problems when it comes to developing indicators, and it is worth observing that it is not the only framework that can be used to identify the well-being of children independently of the well-being of their parent(s). Recent work I have been involved in has been developing indicators of disadvantage for Australians using the concepts of deprivation and exclusion (Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths, 2007) and although our data have been provided by adult respondents to a mailed survey, it has been possible to construct indicators that refer specifically to the needs of children. Examples include children being able to participate in hobby or leisure activities, and in school outings and activities – both of which serve an important integrating role for all children, including migrants. We have found that when people are asked whether or not items are necessary or essential (defined in our study as ‘things that no-one should have to go without in Australia today’) – a key requirement of identifying deprivation – those with and those without children in the household have virtually identical views when it comes to items that relate specifically to the needs of children. This is an important finding, since it suggests that people’s views on what is essential tap into deep-seated and broadly-supported notions of perceived need.

H-K provide a useful discussion of social exclusion (pp. 42-47), where they acknowledge the difficulty involved in developing indicators that relate specifically to children, particularly using direct indicators. One advantage of the exclusion approach is that it allows the role of such factors as location to figure more explicitly, and our research confirms this as a major determinant of access to many of the facilities and services (e.g. public transport, play areas for children, local parks) that are necessary pre-conditions for inclusion. There is an established body of research on children’s perspectives of disadvantage that highlights children’s active engagement with their environments (Ridge, 2002; van der Hoek, 2005). These studies are mostly small-scale and qualitative, involving between 20 and 60 children, with several studies conducting interviews with both children and their parents. They show, for example, that it is usually not economic adversity per se that children worry about, but the concrete examples of exclusion that often accompany it (e.g. the inability to participate in certain activities, in the school setting and elsewhere). There is also a large literature on the relationship between community characteristics and well-being, some of which relates specifically to children, and a small part of which seeks out children’s own perceptions. Much of this literature has also adopted a social exclusion
approach because it provides a powerful framework for examining how communities and neighbourhoods contribute to social problems.

**Specific Comments: Rossi**

I have much less to say about the paper by Andrea Rossi, in part because I have already covered some of the issues that it raises, but also because I am less familiar with the territory it covers. What struck me from reading the paper was how much attention has been placed in the ‘South-South’ literature on the role of remittances in combating poverty in the source country – an approach that necessarily pays less attention to how children and youth are coping in the destination country. This emphasis contrast with the almost total lack of studies of the psycho-social impacts of immigration on children, although the interesting concept of ‘social remittances’ introduced on p. 17 provides an avenue for exploring this theme without abandoning the emphasis on remittances. (This issue links with the role of social networks addressed in the H-K paper, and its role in facilitating chain migration).

The paper makes passing reference to some of the definitional and scope issues raised earlier, including the impact on children ‘left behind’ and to the importance of internal as well as international migration. It also makes the case for more qualitative research, which I support very strongly (see below) and although it refers very sparingly to qualitative studies, I assume that this reflects the fact that few have been conducted. This is surprising, since the topic appears to be one that lends itself naturally to a qualitative approach. Needless to say, I support the conclusion (p. 48) that we need both quantitative and qualitative panel data.

I also note that the reference on p. 46 about the high non-response rate in the Ecuadorian ENEMDU survey, and the comment that this may reflect the kinds of information that households were required to report. This raised an issue in my mind about the need to ensure that ethical guidelines are being adhered to when we conduct research on migrants, many of whom are in very vulnerable situations when they first arrive (and when social researchers are often keenest to interview them). This is an issue that others might wish to comment on.

Finally, I fully endorse the comments made by AR in her conclusion, where she emphasises the diverse circumstances of immigrants, in terms of which children we are referring to, the contexts that explain their immigration and the outcomes under examination. A recent review conducted for UNICEF by my colleagues Ilan Katz and Gerry Redmond (2007) emphasises how on almost every dimension, there is great diversity in the experience and outcomes of migrants to Australia and as a consequence ‘the average level of well-being of migrants is not a very meaningful figure … in order to unpick the differences in outcomes it is necessary to examine the actual country of origin and the circumstances of each migrant cohort’.

This adds another dimension to the challenges associated with the issues raised in these two papers.

**References**


