Bellagio Workshop on Migrant Youth and Children of Migrants in a Globalized World: Position Paper by Peter Saunders

I will organise my comments under four headings: scope and purpose; quantitative data; qualitative data; and strategic alliances.

1. Scope and Purpose

It is important to address these issues because they affect the others. Is the focus on the well-being of children and young people (C&Y) who immigrate, or on the impact of immigration on the well-being of C&Y. The latter seems the more interesting to me, but it raise important questions about the choice of counterfactual and about scope – should we include the impact on children left behind and externalities on other children in the destination country?

I assume that one objective is to gain a better understanding of how and through what mechanisms the migration process affects children, so that we can think more systematically about better policy. If so, then there is much to be gained by adopting a comparative approach, both as an analytical device and as part of the process of policy adaptation. Countries like Australia, Canada and the United States have much to contribute to both, and it is important that these countries are not excluded by the categories around which the project is structured – Australia does not fit easily into either the South-South nexus or the North-North nexus, and last time I checked it wasn’t part of Europe either!

2. Quantitative Data

It is clear that we need more and better data, much of it quantitative. However, there are important issues to be determined that relate to who should provide such data. The general rule that I apply when thinking about the value of any data set is that it should satisfy two key criteria: be useful; and be used. The lessons of the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) are relevant here, because from the outset LIS was motivated and shaped not only by the intellectual curiosity of academic researchers, but also by the needs of statistical agencies (who provided the data) to see their data more widely used, and of policy agencies who saw the value in better understanding what others did and what they achieved. The way that LIS developed built on this alignment of interests, by improving the value-added of national statistics in ways that informed policy, and by wide dissemination of the constructed data in order to encourage its use by researchers.

Although an obvious approach to improving the relevance of data involves marginal adjustments to existing statistics collected by statistical agencies (so that, for example, existing data on children includes more information on migrant status, or existing migrant data includes more information about children) those responsible for these data sets have many other groups competing for more detail in their own specific areas of interest. Why should they listen to us and respond to our concerns? The case will be even harder to make if the list of variables required is a long one (as it is likely to be) and if there is a need to gather at least some of the new data from children directly (as should be the case).

I think we need to pursue this approach, but I would not hold out great hopes for any major advance over the current situation – at least if we do not have the funds to contribute to the changes we are seeking.
A different approach (but not alternative) would involve approaching those agencies that have a direct interest in the issues we are concerned with – Departments of Immigration, Citizenship, Home Affairs or Social Welfare that have vested interest in better understanding the issues in order to develop better policies. In Australia, the Department of Immigration has played an important role in collecting data on immigrants, because it has seen such data as useful, and has used it extensively. These agencies still need to be convinced by the merits of the new data (and of making it available to external analysts) but this might be an easier task than joining the long queues demanding marginal additions to existing national collections.

And if the focus is explicitly comparative, then another obvious group of possible collaborators are the international agencies that have an interest in issues associated with immigration.

Just to add a pessimistic note to this discussion, in Australia we have two relative new surveys that are very relevant to this project.

The Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA) is conducted by the Department of Immigration. It comprises three follow-up surveys of immigrants arriving in the periods 1993-95, 1999-2000 and 2004-05. The first survey has been conducted over three waves, and the second two over two waves, most recently in September 2006. Sample sizes for the three surveys are around 5,000, 3,000 and 10,000 respectively. Now for the bad news. Participants in all three surveys must be at least 15 years of age and although information is collected at both the individual and household level, there is no specific focus on children.

Growing Up in Australia - The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children (LSAC) is funded by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and conducted in partnership with the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It commenced in 2003-04 and is following two cohorts of around 5,000 children: those who were less than 12 months old in 2003-04, and those who were aged 4 in that year. Both cohorts will be interviewed every two years for seven years. LSAC will provide important new information on early childhood development by focusing on issues associated with parenting, family relationships and functioning, schooling, child care and health. The child is the sampling unit and access has been made through the Australian health care system’s (Medicare) administrative records. However, although information is collected on country of birth, year of arrival and use of English as a second language, all of the children involved in the study were born in Australia, so it will not be possible to use LSAC to examine the impact of migration (except indirectly).

The examples illustrate that the data limitations identified in both Background Papers (as well as in the paper produced by the organisers) remain major obstacles, even within data sets that are designed specifically to address issues relating to either children or migrants.

3. Qualitative Data

I have already made a plea for more qualitative data. I think that qualitative data are more appropriate for many of the issues we are concerned with, particularly those relating to how the post-arrival adjustment process impacts upon immigrants, but also because there is a better chance of collecting qualitative data from children themselves – and this, in my view, should be an important goal of a project that is placing children at the centre of attention. I have referred in my commentary paper to
studies that have examined how children perceive and respond to poverty and exclusion and the methodologies developed in these studies can be applied to migrant children. Of course, the results will not be generalisable to the overall migrant population, but much of the existing research suggests that there are unlikely to be common trends or findings given the great diversity in the circumstances of migrants in most countries.

We should still strive for cross-national comparability, although this is relatively new terrain and will need to be approached carefully and cautiously. Qualitative studies tend to be more expensive than quantitative analysis for individual researchers, but only because, from a researcher perspective, the former generally involves collecting our own data while the latter normally involves analysing data that someone else has collected. If we are going to start from scratch in both cases, then qualitative data is likely to be by far the cheaper option (although I am not arguing for only qualitative data, as both are important). Trying to develop a framework for the collection of data that is both qualitative and comparative presents some significant challenges, but it would mark the project as unique and add to its value and contribution.

Before leaving the data issue, I think that it is worth raising again the issue of research ethics – what it will involve and how it may constrain what we can achieve. We need to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of the groups we wish to study, particularly when they are children.

4. Strategic Alliances

I have already made some comments that relate to this issue and will not repeat them. I do think, however, that we need to adopt a strategic approach when considering how to move forward.

The two main groups we need to involve are funding agencies and other researchers. The former need to be convinced that the data they help us to collect – and the analysis supported by that data – will contribute to their own objectives. This is why I favour seeking support from agencies that have a close interest in, and involvement with, either children’s issues or migration issues. The latter group is important because they will be the core users of any new data that is generated. They thus need to be convinced that the data is of sufficient quality to support peer-reviewed publications and this will probably require their input in developing and disseminating the data.

The experience with the LIS project is again informative (although Tim Smeeding can speak about this with much greater authority than me). From the outset, LIS developed a close relationship with both the data providers and with the data users and these relationships have been critical to the success of the project over the 25 years since it was established. Of particular importance are the LIS governance structures (which directly involved data providers in the planning and development of the project), the LIS Discussion Paper series (which provided an outlet for the analyses conducted by users), and the LIS annual training workshops (which have trained new generations of researchers about the data and its uses, in the process building research capacity in the field of comparative research across the participating countries, and also brought the project participants together on a regular basis).

I am sure there are many other examples (it would be good to hear about any qualitative examples of international collaboration with a comparative focus), but the
point is that there are examples out there from which we can learn and on which we can build.