



Summary of a review of Child and Youth Wellbeing Policy in Europe

The MYWEB project is assessing the feasibility of a European Longitudinal Study for Children and Young People (ELSCYP). The early stages of the project have included reviews of current data and surveys that relate to child and youth wellbeing as well as a review of policy on child and youth wellbeing. This briefing paper reports on the review of policy.

1. Undertaking a review of policy

An early task in the project was to undertake a review of child and youth wellbeing policy across all Member States in the European Union. The aims were to: gain an insight into the ways in which policy makers might benefit from longitudinal as opposed to cross-sectional data on child and youth wellbeing; to gain information on current child and youth wellbeing policies and institutional structures; and, to better understand policy monitoring and evaluation processes.

The following questions served as core issues in the interviews: What government or non-governmental organizations are involved in decision-making processes on child/youth wellbeing? What are the key trends in child/youth wellbeing policy going forward? How is the effectiveness of policy on child/youth wellbeing evaluated in different

Member States? Are there particular areas of child/youth wellbeing that are neglected or not sufficiently covered by child/youth policy? Which policy goals have not been achieved yet? How might policy benefit from longitudinal studies? Are there any aspects of child/youth wellbeing that you are missing with regard to general data sets and studies? What needs to be considered in developing a survey on wellbeing and to integrate the opinions of children and young people?

This review was undertaken in 2014 using two mechanisms:

- **Interviews with key informants:** In each Member State a small number of national or regional policy makers and/or academics who influence policy were interviewed. While attempts were made to engage with key informants working in a range of sectors (higher education, charity, private sector, governmental departments, etc.) and with different disciplinary backgrounds, within the time and with the resources available it was not possible to cover all relevant sectors. Each key informant was interviewed (face-to-face, via phone or via email) using a semi structured interview guideline.
- **Policy capture:** Policy information was largely drawn from national bodies responsible for child and youth matters in the given countries. Policies were described and listed by: Policy title, policy area, description of policy objectives, lead organisation, legal status, target group, entitlement rules, nature of benefit, coverage, cycle, conceptualisation of wellbeing, key



measures and indicators, budget for implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

2. Summary of main findings

From across Europe, 256 policies were gathered and interviews with 83 key informants from a large range of sectors were conducted.

What is already covered well?

In general, most of the EU countries embed child and youth policy into all three levels of policy making: the municipal, district and national level; while the legislative frame is put on national level (with the exception of Spain, where the responsibility for youth is devolved exclusively to the regional or local level). Generally, local government has the role of implementing the policies on local level according to specific needs and circumstances, and according to their respective budget. Usually in the form of a ministry, department or office, nearly all EU countries have a national governmental authority responsible for youth. They range widely in financial resources, cross-sectorial influence, integration, and responsibility. While some countries have a dedicated ministry for youth, most of the others cover youth issues as part of a wider portfolio.

Generally the main components of objective wellbeing are covered by laws – be it independent child/youth laws or general laws that also cover the matters and interests of children and young people. There are rights that are specific to young people, such as protection of young workers, juvenile justice and laws that ensure National Youth Councils. For children, there are basic rights ensuring

child protection, their best interests and non-discrimination. In nearly all countries, the legislative framework is supplemented by existing action plans and programs for child and youth wellbeing, mostly promoted by the EU.

New programs and draft laws in EU countries show that the topic of child/youth wellbeing is constantly being revised and adjusted to the present needs of those countries. There are promising developments around the institutional structure of youth policies (e.g. integrating municipalities into youth services, institutional changes that heighten transparency about existing measures, the creation of new National Councils, and the strengthening of *regional* youth policy) and the promotion of early child education and child care systems.

Which gaps are obvious?

A significant conceptual problem is defining the age groups covered by children and young people in relation to policies on wellbeing. Children's age groups are less often specified than young people's age groups.

A significant gap identified through the interview programme and policy capture was between the scope of *child* and *youth* policies.

- *Youth policy on wellbeing*: There are still five countries that have no elaborated independent youth law: Denmark, Spain, France, Italy, and Sweden. In these cases, youth rights are part of non-age specific, general laws and legislations. Laws concerning child and youth matters differ considerably with regard to their quality and coverage (e.g. juvenile



justice or the actual participation possibilities in National Youth Councils). These shortcomings are the result of conceptual deficits, where concrete terms and measures are missing and therefore hinder implementation.

- *Child policy on wellbeing:* Compared to existing youth policies in Europe, child policy is less developed and less coherent. The policies we reviewed display a paternalistic view of children that aims at securing their basic human rights – mostly in terms of objective wellbeing indicators – while neglecting to foster their participation in decision-making processes. Indeed, the policy trends show that children are not perceived as autonomous human beings whose view and opinions are important. Perhaps because of this children's own subjective wellbeing is widely neglected. However, child poverty is still present in all EU countries. There are still countries that lack the basic health facilities, child protection, and basic education. Migrants, Roma children, and children from large families count to the most often excluded groups – being both excluded from policies and from research focus. As long as these obvious deficits remain it is perhaps understandable that a focus on subjective aspects of child wellbeing is of less priority.

3. Implications for the MYWEB project

Nearly all key informants assess the research on child and youth wellbeing in their country as insufficiently elaborated and not adjusted to the actual diversity of the topic. In other words, they strongly emphasize that there is not enough high quality data.

Experts identified a lack of longitudinal studies – particularly on national level. They stressed that longitudinal data are absolutely necessary to study social change and children's and young people's development. However, experts also noted that the implementation of longitudinal studies is difficult for various reasons:

- Researchers are very dependent on funding and often have to adjust their research to meet policy makers' needs, which are often relatively short-term and hence mitigate against investment in longitudinal studies.
- Longitudinal studies can suffer from high attrition rates and often need large samples. As an alternative some experts mentioned the feasibility of cross-sectional surveys across Europe or the use of panel surveys.

Nevertheless, longitudinal studies were clearly welcomed and considered as indispensable in wellbeing research and hence to the support of policy.

The following issues have been identified for consideration in the next stage of the MYWEB project:

- (1) Future research studies must have a greater focus on **subjective aspects** of child and youth wellbeing.



(2) More data is needed on **care leavers**.

(3) More data is needed **comprising children below the age of 11 years**. Often, in studies that comprise children below the age of 11 years, parents serve as proxies. In order to facilitate the realization of child wellbeing studies appropriate data exchange between the diverse institutions (health care, care givers, schools, etc.) and researchers must be addressed and solutions developed.

(4) Data on **mental health** in children and young people is currently limited. Mental health includes the ability to cope with stress and discomfitures. It should include the worries about broken friendships and bullying.

(5) There is only little **research on the actual living environments** of children and young people. Only if these 'life worlds' are studied and better understood, child and youth wellbeing research can be refined and the indicators used can be elaborated.

(6) **Children's body concepts** are almost completely ignored by research and policies, until they reach their teenage phase. Body concepts needs not only to pay attention to children with obvious behavioural problems, put should consider also the usual and temporary phases of bodily behaviour and perception (restlessness, fidgeting or hyperactivity/daydreaming, as pedagogics stress).

(7) Data on child and youth wellbeing must be **group-related in a more precise way**. It is unlikely that a single survey can consider all possible sub-groups of children and young people. Therefore, careful thought about the

target subjects of any future survey is needed.

(8) While researchers are convinced of the value and importance of **longitudinal studies, policy makers must be further acquainted with the benefits** of this kind of research. The far-reaching benefits of longitudinal studies need to be put forward instead of dwelling on the idea of quick results.

