

From Surviving to Thriving Perspective on Child Well-Being

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The process of living as a child has changed in post-Independence India as have the challenges faced by children. Exploring alternative facets and formulations of children's rights though has yet to find space in policy discourse. Use of the term well-being expands the scope of research inquiry and policy attention, from the negatives to the positives, building on the strengths of the parents, the family, the societies and the state, to ensure children are able to not just survive but actually thrive.

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Much has been written in recent years about children and their rights to survival, development, protection and participation.¹ Public discourse on children's rights resembles a see-saw, it remains balanced on two ideals: inclusion (ensuring children's rights are viewed as universal human rights) and recognition (accepting that children are not mini-adults, they are individuals in their own right, only given life experiences need additional protection from all duty-bearers). Allowing for near unanimity in vision and approach, there is thus a remarkable uniformity to the dialogue on child rights. Unanimity has the benefit of allowing for policies to be framed with few conceptual challenges; programmes can then move swiftly from drawing boards to budget line-items, thus underlining the urgency of the need to provide for children. And yet despite all the policy attention, material and human support, there is also unanimous realisation that the experienced reality of childhood provides evidence that children are not and will continue to not do well.

The childhood experiences of children are now less predictable, and the changes in evidence have enormous

social² and political significance, which have yet to influence institutions and policies designed to improve the childhood experience of children. Dramatic shifts have occurred in the conventional markers of childhood – joining school, finishing school, playing, making friends, developing interests, falling ill, getting medical attention – and in how these experiences are configured as a set. These accounts reveal how the process of living as a child has changed in post-Independence India, the challenges faced by children today, and what parents, families, societies and the state, and not necessarily in that order can do to improve the experience of childhood, for children.

Exploring alternative facets and formulations of children's rights though has yet to find space in policy discourse. In India, explorations of child well-being are a research frontier. Use of the term well-being³ expands the scope of research inquiry and policy attention, from the negatives to the positives, building on the strengths of the parents, the family, the societies and the state, to ensure children are able to not just survive, but actually thrive.

Troubled Past

At a recent seminar on child well-being and the state, organised in New Delhi, some participants raised concerns about the use of the term "well-being". Their unease came from a long experience of struggles in the international arena⁴ to safeguard and protect the rights of the

socially and economically marginalised. For the individuals who had struggled, to protect rights language at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on children, the term child well-being surfaced difficult memories. Many of these long-time advocates for children had been at the forefront of the decade-long struggle to integrate child rights within the series of developmental conferences that the UN had organised in the 1990s. This was a process, which included long preparatory meetings, in different parts of the world, during which multiple perspectives on development were shared and where debates were often acrimonious and usually inconclusive. While not everyone involved was always happy with the final language agreed on, it was a process that had widespread ownership from aid-receiving states, as also civil society representatives. Much of the success of that decade culminated in the UN General Assembly session in 2000. It was at the UNGASS in 2000,⁵ that the US, which then as today remained an outlier, on the issue of international accountability on children's rights, attempted unsuccessfully to change the strong rights-oriented language to a focus on child well-being.

Recalling the hours spent ensuring that the US government moves to introduce well-being as a substitute for rights were blocked in the 2000 UNGASS, the advocates shared their insight that the US position had been focusing on the domestic agenda. The US move to substitute well-being arose from its wider discomfort with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly the great distance between its domestic legislation and the ideals of the UNCRC. Resurfacing of the term, albeit more than a decade later and in a domestic setting, still raised old fears of the gains of the rights movement for children being diluted. The 2000 Resolution, protecting the rights language, for those involved in international negotiations, would turn out to be a pyrrhic victory.

The US would manage to overcome their lack of success in diluting the rights orientation by bringing in the Millennium

Development Goals (MDG).⁶ These set of eight globally-endorsed developmental results were to be achieved by all within 15 years. Of these eight, four have a direct relation to children's lives, and the others are closely linked to children and their lives. The Millennium Declaration emerged from a different process from the series of UN-led summits. Crafted primarily by the technical aid bureaucracy of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and a document that academics and many of the travelling civil society activists involved in crafting the development agenda had possibly ignored the 1997 OECD document outlined seven international development goals (IDGs).⁷

The shift in policy attention, from actualising the CRC to achieving the MDGs at the international level meant that in the national policy space, the focus of state action would remain largely limited to the MDG targets, only now they would be garbed in the rights language. At the seminar these fears of a retreat from rights were very much in evidence. Those fears, though expressing concerns from a comparatively recent international experience, only echoed the experience of earlier generations of advocates for children.

In the 1960s, the idea of moulding children to be useful to society reflected the wider understanding of third world development as a problem of modernisation that could be solved through use of technological and managerial inputs. It was widely held that development problem-solving required technical solutions, though it was also accepted that these solutions would have to be tailored to specific biological, social and family contexts. The deliberate shift towards technological and managerial interventions on behalf of children, the child development phase reflected multiple shifts in power within the state and also between the state and non-state actors.

In this phase advocates were calling for a shift in the perception, viewing children as an investment priority, an asset for the long-term. This view was fiercely challenged by the traditional non-state actors who viewed the child as

a dependent, the object of state action, a subject of welfare. These traditionalists were unwilling to accept either the formulation of child development or the changed perception of the child as an investment priority. Much of the acrimony focused on the term child development. In an effort to stave off the change, the term child welfare was reworked,

Child welfare means and can mean (if an economic plan is envisaged) nothing short of the total well-being of the child. It comprises the totality of measures – economic, administrative, technical educational, and social – intended to give each individual an equality of opportunity for growth and development.⁸

Use of the term well-being could thus equally find its roots in the traditional approach of charity, the view of the child as dependent, the dominant paradigm of the early post-Independence years in India.

Yet both these formulations discount and in some instances ignore the long and complex trajectory of development thought and practice, which has led to the term well-being increasingly being used as a progressive barometer to measure the state's efforts and willingness to ensure that children achieve a better quality of life than was available ever before.

Shift in Emphasis Needed

Much of the shifts in thinking proposed, from welfare to development to rights came from an evolving understanding of the child-state relationship. Child well-being though evolves from a different trajectory.⁹ For decades, preceding the MDG process being launched, all governments had been involved in assuring basic needs for their children. In many economically better-off countries, and even in the case of developing ones like India, there were islands where the fundamentals had been met, and universal school enrolment, very high completion rates, low infant and child mortality, and universal immunisation had been achieved. Yet does the achievement of the fundamentals mean that the state's responsibilities towards children are met? Asher Ben-Arieh¹⁰ suggests that while these indicators demonstrate that

the state has been able to ensure survival and basic needs, these are inadequate for measuring the state's responsibilities beyond survival, for assuring a better quality of life.

There is already some evidence happening. For instance, educational policy and programmatic attention has shifted to ensuring children are adequately supported to achieve their potential while also learning the skills required to ensure their quality of life as adults will be superior to that of their parents. Much of this is, though, a recent phenomenon. In the first five decades post-Independence, executive attention was focused on ensuring access to all children, building schools, finding adequate number of educated teachers, and convincing families to send all their children, including the girls, to school. In some districts and in many blocks this continues to be the principal concern. However, in other parts of India, executive attention has shifted to meeting higher order aspirations, for secondary schooling, employability-oriented, higher education for both girls and boys.

For the two generations of advocates who have brought the situation to this stage, adjusting to the changed scenario has been difficult and continues to be difficult. What India has begun to face in the past decade has been the norm in global discourses for about a decade longer but is yet to influence policy thinking.

The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF), which has been tracking changes in child well-being, defines the term as

Child well-being means a lot of things. It is about children being safe, well, healthy and happy. It is about children's opportunities to grow and to learn. It is about positive personal and social relationships and about being and feeling secure and respected. It is also about being given a voice and being heard. In short, it is about the full and harmonious development of each child's personality, skills and talents. All of these have a better chance of being achieved in societies and states that uphold, both in law and in practice, the principle of the 'best interests of the child'. This means respecting, protecting and realising the rights of children and nurturing a social ecology that provides opportunities for all children – boys and girls, disabled or disadvantaged – to become all that their abilities and their potential allow them to be.

The first ACPF report was groundbreaking, developing as it did a sliding measure to compare the efforts of 52 African countries against each other. That report though got limited attention in India. Independently, around the same time, Saith and Wazir,¹¹ scholars engaging with India's development options, suggested that there was a need for a paradigm shift from child poverty to focusing on child well-being in India. Their paper built the case on experience gained as much from the western world, as from the emerging economies and the turn of the century work in sub-Saharan Africa. While the ACPF clearly sees no conflict between rights and well-being, the Saith and Wazir paper, with the focus on the shift in paradigm from poverty, circumvents the rights versus well-being debate. Instead as with ACPF studies, and the Good Childhood Survey,¹² conducted in the UK, it squarely places the ideal of state-led, child well-being efforts in the mainstream of development policymaking.

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Both in the more economically developed countries, and in those where household poverty is still the principal concern of executive policy, the use of the term child well-being allows for the state's accountabilities to be measured on a sliding scale. Second, as the troubled past of child well-being demonstrates, the concept is flexible enough to be useful across the approaches spectrum, from welfare to rights. Third, it allows for inequalities to be highlighted not just in the static of living conditions but equally in the dynamic quality of the experience of childhoods by children. Finally, and possibly most importantly, it allows for measures by which children¹³ can be involved in evaluating the quality of their own life experience.

NOTES

- 1 For the past two decades, the discourse on children and their rights has been principally focused on the language and interpretations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 2 Thomas S Weisner (1998), "Human Development, Child Well-Being and the Cultural Project of Development", *New Directions for Child Development*, 81: 69-85.

- 3 The literature on human well-being is large and growing. For an early view of the arguments, see R H Cassen (1990), "Well-Being in the 1990s: Towards a Balance Sheet", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 6 June 2002.
- 4 For a thoughtful criticism of the limited, Eurocentric worldview of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, see V Raman (2000), "Politics of Childhood: Perspectives from the South", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 35 (46), 40-55.
- 5 Resolution 54/149 of the General Assembly adopted on the Rights of the Child.
- 6 The first formal launch of the idea of these Millennium Development Goals was at the Social Summit plus 5 meeting in Geneva 2000 in a short booklet titled *Better World for All*. Inevitably, the activists and the empathetic press at Geneva renamed it *Bretton Woods for All*.
- 7 For an overview of the process by which the development summits of the 1990s were reduced to the MDGs, see Hulme David (2007), "The Making of the Millennium Development Goals: Human Development Meets Results Based-Management in an Imperfect World", Brooks World Poverty Institute, Working Paper 16. For an important critique of the MDGs, see Ashwani Saith (2006), "From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation", *Development and Change*, 37(6): 1167-99.
- 8 For an overview of the trajectory of the post-Independence, child-state relationship, mapping the evolution of the debate from welfare, to development through rights, see V Balakrishnan (2011), *Growing Up And Away – Narratives of Indian Childhoods*, *Memory, History, Identity* (New Delhi: OUP).
- 9 The paradigm shift in definition and measurement has been detailed in C Althea Huston (2002) "Reforms and Child Development" in *Children and Welfare Reform*, 12: 59-77, and Laura Camfield, Natalia Streuli and Martin Woodhead (2009) "What's the Use of 'Well-Being' in Contexts of Child Poverty? Approaches to Research, Monitoring and Children's Participation", *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 17: 65-109.
- 10 For a well-argued explanation of the evolution of the child well-being social indicators movement, see, Asher Ben Arie (2000), "Beyond Welfare. Measuring and Monitoring the State of Children – New Trends and Domains", *Social Indicators Research*, 52: 235-57.
- 11 Ashwani Saith, and Wazir Rekha (2010), "Towards Conceptualising Child Wellbeing in India: Need for a Paradigm Shift", *Child Indicators Research*, 3 (2010): 385-408.
- 12 Good Childhood Report (2013), "Children's Well-Being, Concepts, Variations and Trends", Chapter 2.
- 13 Qvortrup, Jens (1997), "A Voice for Children in Statistical and Social Accounting", Chapter in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, Allison James and Alain Prout, Taylor & Francis, e-library, 2005.

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