

IV Annual Conference of the Centre for Child Well-Being and Development

“What works? Behavioral and Social Approaches to Boost Children’s Well-Being”

15 March 2019, University of Zurich, Switzerland

The IV Annual Conference of the Centre for Child Well-Being and Development (CCWD) was a one-day event in which researchers, policy makers, and private funders from philanthropic initiatives discussed rigorous research evidence and exchanged knowledge on strategies (and failures) to boost children’s well-being. The event also served to foster and strengthen cooperation between the multiple partners involved in promoting child development in low capacity settings.

In the morning of the event, researchers from the University of Zurich, ETH Zurich, and the World Bank shared their insights on the effects of behavioral interventions in Malawi, Nicaragua, Niger, and Nigeria. The researchers presented evidence from randomized controlled trials. They tested different policies that targeted one or more of the three elements of behavioral change – knowledge, attitudes, and behavior – in the area of child well-being. The morning concluded with a presentation on practical experiences of behavioral change interventions in Palestine.

Simon Hänni from the CCWD showed how supportive attitudes towards harmful sexual practices could be reduced in Malawian villages. This was achieved by introducing a simple voluntary donation system to offer parents an alternative way to signal pro-sociality to the village community. According to the authors, before the donation system was introduced, harmful sexual practices towards girls were a way to signal pro-sociality. Follow-up research will examine whether one year later, the intervention was able to generate changes in behavior beyond attitudes.

Patrick Premand from ETH Zurich (on sabbatical from the World Bank) presented a research on the effects of cash transfers with and without a Behavioral Change Communication (BCC) in Niger. Cash transfers with BCC lead to a range of changes in parenting practices among the beneficiaries. These impacts were not observed for unconditional cash transfers. The researchers also documented changes in parenting practices of households that were not directly targeted. However, there were no substantial positive changes in human capital or anthropometrics. These limited results of the intervention might be due to the short time period between the intervention and its evaluation, the need of complementary supply side interventions, the extreme low capacity context, or due to a crowding out of nutrition messages, as it has been shown by other studies.

Victor Orozco from the World Bank studied the effects of a TV show on adolescents’ sexual knowledge, attitudes, and HIV behavior. The examined third season of the MTV Shuga drama contained behavioral change messages aimed at limiting the spread of HIV. As a consequence of watching the show, adolescents’ knowledge, attitudes, and some risky sexual behaviors changed. However, complementary economic empowering programs might be required to increase condom use and decrease inter-generational sex. The authors stress the cost-effectiveness of such “edu-tainment” programs especially for those adolescents with high character-identification.

Lucy Nusseibeh discussed her experience with different behavioral approaches promoting self-efficacy and decrease feelings of victimhood in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian context. In particular, she used education materials promoting non-violence, filmmaking, and workshops. Lucy Nusseibeh has more than 20 years of experience working within the non-governmental organization Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy (MEND) that she founded. She expressed her interest in collaborating with researchers to create rigorous evidence about the effects of MEND’s programs.



After each of these presentations, the audience was ripe with questions and remarks. In particular, questions about the cost effectiveness and scalability of the behavioral change interventions were of great interest to policy-makers. Participants also discussed the complementarity between supply and demand side policies, stressing the role of public services for human capital and health outcomes. They also raised questions about the effects of behavioral change interventions without any cash transfer from the government. The effects of parenting information provided to father or father-like figures on boys' development, a result of Patrick Premand's research, was met by great interest. Several people stressed the importance of long-term interventions and longitudinal evaluations of programs complementing the evidence gained from randomized controlled trials.

After lunch, Mekonnen Woldegorgis (UNICEF Malawi) presented the main findings of the report "Harmful and Traditional Practices Survey in Malawi". UNICEF ensured local ownership of the research, facilitated the large-scale data collection, obtained the necessary ethical approvals, and assured the context-appropriate wording of sensitive questions. Guilherme Lichand (CCWD) highlighted the value added of the collaboration. The CCWD contributed through their methodological expertise for eliciting sensitive behaviors without falling prey to social desirability biases, and extensive data analysis techniques.

In the afternoon roundtable, Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli (WHO), Priscilla Idele (UNICEF-Innocenti), Adina Rom (Policy Analytics), and Fabio Segura (Jacobs Foundation) discussed the research and policy agenda for promoting child well-being in developing countries. Several issues emerged from this discussion with the audience: researchers and policy makers are encouraged to improve the coherence and coordination of behavioral initiatives across ministries and donor organizations. For example, advancing gender equality would improve many dimensions of well-being, such as those related to sexual and reproductive health. More generally, speakers stressed the importance of institutional frameworks and policy makers to implement behavioral initiatives at scale. There was also a consensus on the idea that the private sector and other actors need to be involved to broaden efforts and increase the impact of child well-being interventions. New research questions will arise as interventions shown to be effective are implemented at scale. To approach these and existing questions, researchers need to listen to beneficiaries and policy makers. The aggregate statistics hide the diversity of challenges faced by children and parents in developing countries. To learn about policy impacts "on the way", the collection of longitudinal data and the development of feedback mechanisms will be crucial. The implementation, coordination, and monitoring of child well-being programs will require building capacity in government ministries and researchers in developing countries.

Finally, Nava Ashraf from the London School of Economics held a keynote speech on "Children as Agents of Change." She presented research on the effects of a twelve-hour negotiation course on the life outcomes of girls from a poor Zambian neighborhood. Girls that were randomly selected to attend a specially adapted negotiation course – rather than a non-skill focused empowerment course of the same duration – were much more likely to continue with school. The girls used the negotiation skills, among other purposes, to convince their parents respectfully to let them continue with school. Nava Ashraf plans to evaluate the persistence of the negotiation training on long-term outcomes such as the age of marriage or motherhood. Her research influenced the redesign of Zambian school curriculum on life skills. A high-quality implementation of the course will require capacity building of Zambian teachers. As a positive side effect, teachers will themselves benefit from these new skills. The conference was an excellent opportunity to learn about the effects of behavioral approaches on various dimensions of child well-being. The participants raised questions and identified pathways of action along with researchers and leaders from international organizations and organizations from the private sector.

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