



# CCWD

CENTER FOR CHILD WELL-BEING  
& DEVELOPMENT

## Annual conference 2018

Child Health – Children’s Life Journeys and Critical Inflection Points

### *Conference report*

The CCWD third annual conference took place at the University of Zurich on Friday March 16, 2018. To maximise impact, this year’s format differed from its predecessors in being concentrated on a single day and, for the first time, chaired by an outside moderator. The new structure was felt to have met all expectations.

About 70 delegates from Europe, Africa and the Americas, comprising scholars and university students, Unicef representatives, development practitioners and some government officials, gathered to hear world class experts on child development discuss their work and major issues in the field.

To facilitate participation and feedback, the event was structured in four distinct but connected blocks. The first, concentrating on early childhood development investments and cutting edge research on childhood health, featured James Leckman, Professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University, who described the biological foundations for investment in children during their first 1,000 days and the potential for biomarkers in detecting stress.

Citing authorities such as Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman and multi award winning child development specialist Professor Sir Michael Meany, Leckman examined the importance of influences from as early as the foetal stage, and the effect these could have not only on a child’s subsequent educational performance, but also its mental and physical health.

Drew Bailey, an Associate Professor at the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine, followed with a presentation on Insights into Nature, Timing and Targeting of Early Childhood Interventions. Bailey revealed evidence suggesting a more nuanced assessment of the value of early interventions, at least in terms of educational outcomes.

In the subsequent open discussion, Leckman and Bailey stressed the complementarity of their work in analysing early intervention, in spite of the apparent differences. Both, unsurprisingly concurred that early childhood development required extensive further study, and how a child developed was a matter of nature and nurture.

CCWD’s second panel, adopting a similar format, focused on prevention and mitigation, particularly through the use of incentives to modify behaviour

Günther Fink, a health economist and Associate Professor at the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute in Basel, who was formerly at Harvard, looked at Demand for Preventive Healthcare and Treatment. He focussed on the take up of malaria bed nets under different pricing and inducement structures in a wide ranging field study in Africa.



Stepping in at short notice after a last minute cancellation, Guilherme Lichand, Assistant Professor for Child Wellbeing and Development at the University of Zurich and CCWD Director, spoke about a programme “Marketing for Health Development.” drew lively interest, including multiple interventions from the floor on methodological issues. The value of nudges was widely acknowledged, with discussion also embracing different types of incentives, including role models or even television and radio.

In the third, and arguably most crucial, of the conference’s four blocks, afternoon discussion was dominated by a round table on pathways from research to child health programming. This was a cornerstone of the CCWD’s wish to emphasise ways to improve links between academic research and actual programs in the field instituted by aid organisations, NGOs and multilateral bodies.

Johannes Wedenig, Unicef’s Country Representative in Malawi, Mica Jenkins, Operations Research Coordinator at the World Food Programme, Charles Nelson, a multiple professor at Harvard, and Jose Cuesta from Unicef’s Innocenti research centre in Florence, described briefly their work and backgrounds before honestly addressing some of their past successes and failures.

Inevitably, discussion about failures was particularly appreciated by the audience, with almost all the round table participants admitting frankly to frustrations or serious setbacks at various times in their work. These ranged from difficulties in communicating and understanding in the field to an institutionalised inability in one case to recognise and accept failure - let alone learn from it. In arguably the highpoint of the session, panelists suggested ways in which setbacks could be more honestly addressed – and the experience more valuably incorporated into future programmes. The linked Q&A was correspondingly lively.

The conference concluded with a closing keynote speech by Michael Kremer, Gates Professor of Developing Societies at Harvard, on The Long Run Impacts of Improving Child Health: the case of deworming.

The work of Prof Kremer, a globally acknowledged expert on development issues, has highlighted the sustained benefits for health and education of deworming programmes and value of clean drinking water. In his presentation, focused on fieldwork covering a number of villages in rural Kenya, he produced empirical evidence demonstrating the value of such initiatives. Admitting such findings had subsequently been questioned on technical grounds, he further argued that the evidence was sufficiently robust to withstand academic interrogation and had, moreover, fully proved its worth in practice.

The conference concluded with Guilherme Lichand thanking his team, and expressing thanks to Unicef, Unicef Switzerland, the Swiss Development Corporation and the Excellence Foundation Zurich for supporting the Centre’s work and this year’s event.

Haig Simonian, journalist and moderator of the event.