Inspiring Children's Futures

University of Strathclyde Glasgow

Inspiring Children's Futures

Learning Report Series

Using a Whole-of-Government Approach to Advance Child Well-Being:

The primary elements of a whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach with and for children, and future generations

Learning Report Three – June 2022

The gap is widening between our aspirations for children, and the reality that many children face. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated governance gaps and challenges and had a far-reaching impact on children's lives.[1] A focused whole-of-government approach (WGA) to achieve children's well-being has become all the more urgent.

Supporting children's well-being is complex and requires a multi-faceted response from governments. Sound public governance principles are essential to inform this response - requiring actions that unite across government portfolios, driven by a clear vision for the outcomes, and sustained over a long time-horizon.[2]

This cannot be achieved through the singular mandates of individual ministries or government agency efforts.[3] A WGA for children's well-being demands government leadership and action to initiate, catalyse and coordinate aligned and integrated efforts. While WGA approaches are increasingly common across the world in many thematic areas, the prioritisation of children poses its own distinct challenges which necessitate a sharply tailored approach.

A WGA to achieve children's well-being needs to be informed by this *distinct* nature of children – their needs, rights, evolving capacities, and their circumstances. Where a WGA is explicitly shaped to reflect the distinctive nature of children, governments are more successful in their efforts.[4]

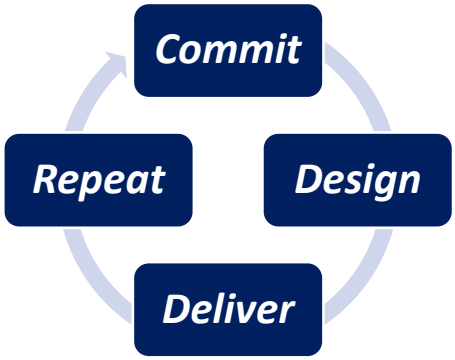
Additionally, national governments need to recognise the limitations of government and of public sector agencies – at both central, regional and local levels - and should play a leading role in actively facilitating a broader approach to addressing these complex challenges, as captured by the whole-of-nation approach[5][6] (WNA). In consequence, as well as establishing and developing this WGA,[7] they will typically have greater resources and convening power to support intensive, collaborative programmes to support child well-being.

Sufficiently effective responses to children's circumstances are simply out of reach without a WGA, and one which also motivates national non-governmental partners (in principle, embracing civil society, NGOs, the private sector and individuals) to inspire a whole nation's effort. In doing so, a WGA plays a key role in inspiring, facilitating and accelerating a WNA. Together, they can ensure clarity around a shared vision and outcome objectives, and the effective delivery of programmes on the ground, essential to achieving the distinctive and long time-horizon for children's well-being.

This Report summarises the key policy messages

emerging from a public governance evidence review,[viii] applied uniquely to the distinct nature of children. It draws on the existing literature – both the academic literature and the applied strategic and policy documents of many governments – and is informed further through interviews with a range of expert government policymakers.[a]

It offers a strategic *Whole-of-Government Approach to Advance Child Well-being* to secure the vision for children over the long-term, one which all nations aspire to achieve. This Approach is built on four Key Functions for governance and is applied through dynamic and responsive Phases. Together, these Functions and Phases establish the foundations of an integrated, collective *Whole-of-Government Framework for Child Well-being* that stimulates a whole nation to effectively respond to, nurture and sustain the well-being of children.



[a] Our thanks go to expert interviewees across Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland & Wales.

Building a Whole of Government Approach: Four Key Functions

1. Integrating

Establish good leadership for a successful WGA-WNA.[9] Leadership that listens, learns, inspires and steers people toward a vision, crystallising the thinking of a range of institutions and individuals, to define the collective mission and vision, is essential. These leaders set the cross-cutting policy issues in a coherent and salient political agenda, capitalise on windows of opportunity, establish rules and structures for multi-actor policy collaboration and establish accountabilities to assess policy outcomes and manage results.

Champion the interdependence of political leadership and administrative capacity. Without human and financial resources and a bureaucratic structure, no leader can integrate policy.[10] Clarity of individual leadership for child well-being initiatives must be accompanied by a full collective sharing of responsibility for the delivery of the overall child well-being outcome objectives.

Drive and maintain coordination efforts for child and familial well-being over time, from conception of vision to delivery. All governments should seek to identify how their policy and programmes might beneficially impact child well-being. Most government interventions affect the well-being of both the child and the family in some way, e.g. those which address climate change and social inequalities, and so designing interventions which both enhance familial and child well-being (and minimise potential harm) should be a central focus of government. *In nations where child well-being is a relatively new emerging focus*, an early emphasis on areas of policy which directly impact children is a valuable priority, e.g. those in health and education. Enhancing the outcomes here is a critical first step. *In nations where child well-being policy is more advanced and has been a focus for some years*, governments should build on strong political leadership and administrative capacity to create comprehensive programmes for significantly enhancing delivery and implementation capacity and effectiveness.[11]

Value and create space for dialogue and engagement between and within government and civil society. *This is* essential to enhance policies effectiveness and legitimacy.[12] Better policies require an understanding of the nuanced realities that directly relate to the outcomes they are addressing.[13] People-centred – and especially child-centred – policy-making demands these insights.

Engage with children, as well as with their families and carers. Children most needing support can be those hardest to engage—and most important to hear from. These are the children whose voices are seldom heard, who experience the most serious risks and vulnerable situations, and whose rights are at greatest risk of being breached. These are the children that governments' policies seek to most support. Prioritising

engaging with these children reflects the UN Agenda 2030[14] pledge by all governments to "address the furthest behind, first". Governments must draw on organisations where staff have expertise and trusting relationships and find inspiring and creative ways to engage children[15] in the development of their overall child well-being strategies.[16] Engaging with families and others *about* children is essential, but insufficient.[17]

2. Evidencing and Learning

Develop a data framework for monitoring. A data framework for monitoring the targeted child well-being outcomes, and the impact of policy on the evolution towards these outcomes, must be established in order to track progress towards the national vision, and its ultimate outcome objectives, for child well-being.[1819] A system-wide data collection framework[20] can ensure the availability of and ease of access to data and information related to children's well-being and inform policy decision-making over time. Adapting these to well-being requires drawing upon a wide range of evidence and data across complex systems. This includes drawing on an increasing range of data types, and making full use of the data potential available. Building the infrastructure to extract these data on a regular basis underpins the success of these efforts.

Pursue learning from a range of analysis approaches. Evidence that informs decision-making—and impact assessments in particular—will be imperfect, and so the process of learning is a top priority. Case studies and targeted analyses can play a powerful role in making the case to the political leadership in their resource allocation roles. Additionally, illustrative and demonstration analyses have a critical role to play in assessing how systems work, and in the effectiveness of the key pieces of those systems.

Prioritise Child Impact Assessments even in crowded policy environments. This requires the prioritisation of child well-being amidst a significant number of other high-level outcome objectives of government, as well as prioritisation between different policy and expenditure programmes *within* a specific outcome. Done well, Child Impact Assessments can capture the breadth of impact of expenditure programmes and policies – both individually and collectively –on the key outcomes that have been identified to define child well-being.[2122]

Embark on meaningful cost-benefit analyses. Cost-benefit analyses are one key element of Child Impact Assessments, which may be important to assess the value of interventions, despite the challenge of conceptualising and measuring their application for child well-being. Such evidence needs to cover a breadth of analysis that is often overlooked.[23] These findings can contribute to the sustainability of a WNA to child well-being over the long term.[24]

Build on the work already underway to make progress. *In countries in which child well-being is emerging,* governments need to develop analytical capacity by clarifying the purpose of policy measurement. *In countries with a consolidated child well-being strategy,* governments should apply effective child impact assessments and after-the-fact evaluations for understanding how a specific policy measures affects the child. Data, information, and evidence trigger processes of learning about what works to support child well-being. *In countries where regulatory impact assessment relies on cost-benefit analysis*, governments should prioritize child well-being by adopting lower discount rates, favouring investment in future generations. *In countries where regulatory impact assessment relies on methods other than cost-benefit analysis*, governments should prioritize child well-being by integrating this specific impact test into social inequality and disadvantaged social group tests and other forms of social impact assessments.

3. Resourcing

Design appropriate long-term resourcing levels. Well-designed and appropriate resourcing is essential, to enable the necessary human skills and financial resources to deliver the collectively designed programmes. Multi-agency budgeting and funding have an important part to play, especially where there are programmes demanding significant joint working and a need for highly coordinated implementation.

Determine tools for understanding and measuring impact and progress. Adopting systematic mechanisms and tools is needed to assess the impact and effectiveness of programmes; both quantitative and qualitative tools can provide important insights. Estimation and modelling have a key role to play in informing the nature and potential scale of impact of programmes and policy; these are invaluable and require careful planning because analysis of impact will be indicative rather than scientific.

Establish a budgetary priority for child well-being. The design of budgeting systems for child well-being must reflect the key questions that the WGA-WNA is seeking to address. In general, budgets should look at the stock of spending in reassessing and refining the prioritisation of resource allocations, and not at the margin. Establishing a budgetary priority for child well-being, and ensuring measures for the progressive realisation, including increasing fiscal space, are all essential ingredients.

Secure the range of human resources that correspond with the specific roles needed. Recruit, train and coach skilled people suited to their roles for an effective implementation of a WGA-WNA approach. This will hinge on leadership, engagement, administration, policy design and implementation, and analysis skills.

Determine the implementation methods. Implementation methods suited to the policy purposes and contexts guide the process of change. Valuable intermediary bodies can act as conduits back to government, to inform better policy-making throughout the process.

4. Sustaining

Establish an inter-generational horizon. The resilience and sustainability of programmes over many years and indeed decades, to enhance children's well-being are critical to securing child well-being. Given the scale and nature of the challenge, identifying an inter-generational horizon for the strategy is necessary.

Anticipate shocks and deploy strategic foresight to embed resilience. Attempting to anticipate and build resilience in the context of the major challenges and shocks that might be expected over a long-term horizon is an important, though difficult, step. Strategic foresight is crucial to the embedding of resilience to manage major external shocks.

Commit government and encourage parliamentary leadership. As the body with the greatest convening power, and the greatest resource capacity, central government – including top government leadership and the National Cabinet – must visibly and consistently demonstrate a powerful commitment.

Sustain strong and effective collective leadership. Integral to this Approach is the indispensable pre-requisite to establish, nurture and sustain strong and effective collective leadership and partnership across the nation, drawn from all the key parties that can contribute, and benefit from, the advancement of children's well-being.

Nurture the commitment of broader society. The commitment of broader society and its perceptions of the importance and fundamental value of children's well-being are the key to sustainability over long periods of time. Building this commitment is therefore a top priority. An Approach that reaches beyond government structures is fundamental to sustainability, as the drawing in of the key actors and contributors in civil society to form a shared agenda of action can only strengthen the basic commitment of society over the medium- to long-term.

Regularly make the case for investing in the well-being of children. This is a continuing imperative. Resources – both financial and human – will always be under serious pressure in every nation and presenting increasingly better evidence and understanding of the value of investing in children must be a top priority to sustain progress. Resourcing will always need to align closely with the programmes that have been adopted by the WGA and WNA partnership to address long-term challenges. The principle of appropriately and sustainably funding the full configuration of programmes and policies is crucial.

Sustain the infrastructure and operationalisation. Sustaining the formal and informal structures that create the mechanisms for intensive partnership and collaborative working is indispensable. This needs to be initiated by government and retained as a top priority.

Implementing: The Dynamics

Commit, design, deliver, and repeat

Effectively applying the Four Key Functions for a strategic *Whole-of-Government Approach to Advance Child Well-Being* is a cyclical and highly responsive process across three dynamic phases. Over these phases, priorities, emphases and actions will change as new learning and evidence emerge, and as the approaches are refined to reflect these insights. This adaptability is needed to achieve and maintain improvements which lead to achieving child well-being over the long-term.

These phases include:

- ***Committing*** to WGA and WNA principles to establish a shared policy agenda and maintain a high-level commitment to achieve children's well-being;

- ***Designing*** high quality interventions and redesigning these further as new evidence and data are fed into the process; and

- ***Delivering*** these policies, programmes and services through WGA and WNA principles.

Many challenges can be anticipated. Governments should develop early warning systems needed to raise awareness of emerging concerns, and plan contingencies for: retaining participation; anticipating gaps; building incentives; and anticipating counterincentives.

Conclusion

Outlining four **Key Pillars** for governance, and three dynamic **Action Phases**, this paper describes the **Whole-of-Government Framework for Child Well-being**, a strategic approach necessary to secure the vision for children to which all nations aspire.

The four **Key Pillars** form the *foundation* for securing a successful WGA approach: **integrating**; **evidencing and learning**; **resourcing**; and **sustaining**. Importantly, it also captures governments' role in driving forward a **Whole-of-Nation approach** to maintain the prioritisation of child well-being in a busy policy environment over the long-term.

Effectively *applying* the Pillars is a highly dynamic process; it is cyclical, responsive and has many phases. The WGA Framework's **Action Phases** consider the changing priorities, emphases, and actions throughout the approach, as programmes and policies of intervention are taken forward.

Together, these **Pillars** and **Action Phases** are central to establishing an integrated and collective **Whole-of-Government Framework for Child Well-being** for a whole nation to effectively respond to, nurture and sustain the well-being of children.

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Learning Report Three

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Endnotes

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See chapter 1 for an insightful analysis of these points in the context of the UN Agenda 2030 SDGs.

[viii] The full public governance evidence review report will be published in 2022, and available here: www.inspiringchildrensfutures.org

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[14] The Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. The 17 Goals were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the Goals. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

[15] Lundy et al https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01411920701657033

[16] For example, see: Rights Right Now young people's group https://www.togetherscotland.org.uk/about-us/our-partnerships/rights-right-now/ and #Cabinettakeover https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/cabinettakeover2022/

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[23] See Figure 2 page 14-16 of Goudie, A (2021) IICF Learning Report https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ef078c78c147231fcfd509f/t/60d499faaae2dc2a358d49d9/1624545797843/FIN+22+Jun.pdf and page 14 OECD paper Figure 3.2. The economic and social returns from investing in children's well-being – a schematic illustration from here: https://www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being/OECD-WISE-Webinar-Children-Post-Covid19-Decade-Oct2020.pdf and/

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