



Foundations of well-being in children's and youth's everyday lives in Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan

Christine Hunner-Kreisel¹ · Doris Bühler-Niederberger² · Aysel Sultan³ 

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Abstract

The contributions in this special section deal with growing up in two post-Soviet states – Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan. Each contribution has a different priority on the variety of forces that shape the wellbeing of children and youth as structured in the interaction between the efforts and abilities of their families, the state, as well as social and health policies in both national and cross-national contexts. In this special section, we understand infrastructure as places and institutions for day-care, education, leisure, social and health services. The papers identify barriers that children and young people encounter as they attempt to realize their potential and wishes in a variety of social, educational, and health contexts. These obstacles have something in common: they are rooted in a deficit of public and social infrastructure that is evident in these two states (European Commission, 2011; Sardarova, 2020; OECD, 2018; UNICEF, 2015).

Keywords Azerbaijan · Child and youth wellbeing · Education · Healthcare · Kyrgyzstan · Post-soviet countries

Making this special section came about at the suggestion of Christine Hunner-Kreisel following the 2019 ISCI conference in Tartu, Estonia. She played a decisive role in moving it forward until almost its completion. Sadly, Christine's passing earlier this year left it to the two of us to finish the remaining work. We are deeply saddened

✉ Aysel Sultan
aysel.sultan@tum.de

¹ Faculty of Social Work, University of Vechta, Vechta, Germany

² Department of Education and Social Sciences, University of Wuppertal, Wuppertal, Germany

³ School of Social Sciences and Technology, Technical University of Munich, Munich, Germany

to have lost a brilliant colleague and a dear friend, and hope that this special section is close to what she was imagining, and that Christine would have liked the results.

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The international discourse on the welfare of children and youth is not representative enough of the local state measures in the two countries and does not insist on expanding the welfare services in these countries in accordance with the market economy principles of international organizations (see Mundy & Verger, 2015; Nordveidt, 2012). So far, attention has been mainly limited to health and education institutions. The key indicators that international organizations collect for determining the quality of growing up, apart from infant mortality and nutrient supply, are the school attendance rates at different levels of education ranging from early childhood education to upper secondary and higher education (UNICEF, 2019). In the last two decades, the interest to measure the success of education has also risen sharply. The development of appropriate measurements should help individuals and states combat poverty with the help of the international organizations (Schleicher, 2019), and allow a ‘lean’ welfare state system (World Bank, 2011). However, growing up with the aim to develop one’s individual capabilities to attain better future wellbeing (Fegter & Richter, 2014) places further demands on the state and its institutions.

Although the contributions are focused on two countries of the former Soviet Union, they reveal some general insights into the unifying triad of domains – family, state, international participation – and the significance of their interaction for the wellbeing of children and adolescents. In this sense, we want to address the contextual conditions and the welfare state framing of children’s and youth’s wellbeing (Ben-Arieh, 2014; Rees, & Dinisman, 2015). Likewise, the program of international organizations, which is currently mainly focused on the individual needs and development, can be critically examined. Are there limits to an individual approach (like in many Western and Northern states) that primarily aims to empower the individual (Schaub, Henck, & Baker, 2017; Zapp, 2019) and hence considers educational opportunities and healthcare as the main areas of concern?

Oftentimes, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan are characterized as under-developed welfare states (European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2018). In Azerbaijan, this is largely related to the lack of non-oil economic performance, which results in “partial withdrawal of the state from welfare provision” (Sayfutdinova, 2015, p.24) and deficiencies in social infrastructure. This concerns a wide range of state interventions that could regulate and shape the lives of children, but which are either absent or

insufficient. This is clearly seen in the constant privatization of the education sector – kindergartens, schools, and universities (Lepisto, 2010, p.76) – attempting to replace the insufficient state offers whether quantitatively or qualitatively (Gonzaleva, 2015; Roberts & Pollock, 2009, p.585). While at the beginning of 2000s privatization of kindergartens and schools in Azerbaijan was a promise for a better quality of education (Isaxanli, 2006), nowadays the increasing prices in private educational institutions raise other socio-economic concerns. Families who decide in favor of private education want to give their children a head start in the face of a national labor market that offers young people few opportunities for entry (Diuk, 2012, p. 10). The absence of welfare state measures is striking when it comes to planning and utilizing public space in towns and cities. Especially in urban centers, public spaces are transformed profitably by private enterprises and not oriented towards the specific needs of children and youth (Darieva, 2011; Hunner-Kreisel et al., 2020). Children and youth as a group of people who need some protection but also have a right to participate in society do not participate in the design and use of publicly accessible spaces and places. In concrete terms, this means that there is a lack of safe roads for the self-determined mobility of children – be it on the way to school, friends, or playgrounds as attractive places for children to spend leisure time and the use of which would not be typically associated with any financial costs.

In Kyrgyzstan the continuous efforts for better developmental strategies are constrained by Kyrgyz Republic's limited state budget. For example, monthly benefits are paid to families with children, however, the recent inflation showed a higher growth than the increase in these payments and only a small percentage of poor households was eligible for payments (see OECD, 2018, p. 16). This system was changed in 2018 in favor of a universal child benefit, which should help poor families better; the effects are not yet determined.¹ As far as educational institutions are concerned, they are massively and chronically underfinanced (Mogilewski, 2011). Consequently, inequality in education must also be perceived as a problem in Kyrgyzstan. This also applies to kindergartens, which offer insufficient places and are disproportionately attended by children from wealthy families and from parents with higher education (Public Foundation "For Families", 2018). There are more than twice as many children from the highest income quintile attending kindergarten than from the lowest quintile (Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic and UNICEF, 2019, p. 192). A problem of inequality also arises about attendance at the rapidly growing number of private schools in primary and secondary education. To a lesser extent, however, this also applies to public schools, which – in view of their chronic underfunding in Kyrgyzstan – ask parents for contributions towards the costs of renovation. Reputable public schools demand higher fees, which are declared voluntary, but nevertheless limit access to children from poorer families (Abdoubayetova, 2019). Attending private primary and secondary schools goes hand in hand with more ambitious career plans: the parents whose children attend private schools predominantly want their children to study abroad, while only a small proportion of the parents of children attending public schools want this (Abdoubayetova, 2019). An expensive

¹ See <https://www.developmentpathways.co.uk/blog/free-last-kyrgyzstans-liberation-poor-relief-universal-social-security-children/>.

education at a private university at home or abroad is often expected to lead towards a professional career abroad, although parents are more likely to consider a career abroad for their sons than for their daughters (Chicherina, 2021).

In Kyrgyzstan, spaces for children to move around independently and with self-determination are scarce as well, and there are hardly any efforts to create such spaces. A room of their own in the apartment or even a corner of their own are a rarity for children, even in wealthy families with large houses (the same situation is also observed in Baku, Azerbaijan; see Hunner-Kreisel et al. 2020). Playgrounds and sports fields are also rare in the overall public infrastructure, not to mention contact points for the problems of young people, such as youth counselling centers or parent counselling centers. Although rural areas offer opportunities to play in nature, the transit traffic is a source of danger and fear for the smaller children, which is not to be underestimated in view of the usual planning for rural communities, which produced one-street villages intersected by the main traffic road (Bühler-Niederberger & Schwittek, 2011; Schwittek, 2016). Leisure time is spent mainly at home, especially as far as girls are concerned (Möller-Slawinski & Calmbach, 2015).

Consequently, in both countries, families bear a large part of the responsibility for caring, educating, and coping with everyday life together with the children, which is challenging under the given conditions of scarce welfare state institutions, infrastructure, and lack of individual family resources. Deinstitutionalization, as it has been established during the Soviet times, has shifted the responsibility of caring for the wellbeing of young people onto families (Huseynli, 2018). This comprehensive responsibility of the family is, however, problematic given that families are strongly committed to their own economic survival, especially in view of the slow development of welfare state measures concerning, for example, pension and care in old age (Habibov, & Afandi, 2011; UNICEF, 2007, p. 62; Bühler-Niederberger, 2020a; 2020b). Their efforts on behalf of their children cannot, therefore, be concentrated too much on something like children's self-oriented development but must integrate the development of the interests and preferences of the children and adolescents into the family dynamics and the needs of the family. This is a potential contradiction to the definition of wellbeing as including a development of one's own capabilities and realization of one's own potential.

Each contribution to this special section questions the relationship between family and the state along different dimensions. These dimensions include formal and informal education, questions of mobility and space, normality, and deviation from it through children's and young people's social and cultural practices, institutional welfare, social and health policies, and their problematizations including questions of socially ordered (power) relations according to class, gender, and generation. In this variety of approaches, this special section contributes to the scarce literature on Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan and emphasizes both the impact of institutional hierarchies as well as the enabling environments that shape the childhoods and youths in the two countries.

This special section begins with the contribution lead by the late *Christine Hunner-Kreisel*, co-authored by *Nigar Nasrullayeva*, and later joined by *Stefan Kreisel*, *Aysel Sultan*, and *Doris Bühler-Niederberger*, which was in the revision stage before Christine's passing and which we, as her colleagues and co-editors of the special sec-

tion decided to complete on the authors' behalf. The contribution reports on a qualitative study in which the researchers (CHK and NN) interviewed middle-school-aged girls in Baku during their various leisure activities. The interview material provides a differentiated insight into the children's perspective on generational order and relationships between their parents, their teachers and themselves. The results show that the children largely accepted these asymmetrical relationships as they were, showing what the authors call 'competent compliance' or compliance resulting from their vulnerability as children. Only rarely did they express irritation or rejection (referred to as 'fragile compliance'). This drives the analyses of vulnerability and wellbeing in the article. The article impressively shows how much the daily life of the girls is limited to the interactions with their immediate families. The authors point here to the absence of welfare state offers for this age group in particular regarding the possibilities for leisure time.

Drawing on Carol Bacchi's critical policy analysis tool – 'what's the problem represented to be' (WPR approach) – and the critical drug studies literature, Aysel Sultan offers an interdisciplinary analysis of the national drug policy in Azerbaijan. The article unravels various problematizations in two selected policy texts to discuss the impact and implications of preventive legislations on the lives of young people who use drugs. The study points out that prioritization of certain conditions by publicly funded institutions suggest a deliberate strategy of denial and neglect of those labelled as 'undeserving' of care and welfare.

The part on child-wellbeing in Kyrgyzstan starts with a contribution by *Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Jessica Schwitek*'s. This is a re-analysis of three preponderantly qualitative studies from kindergarten children to university students, arranging the study results in a quasi-longitudinal design. The central question is what it means for the young generation's well-being to submit to the strong obligations of intergenerational solidarity and authority of elders. For all three age groups, reasons can be shown for the acceptance of generational obligations as well as for their (partial) rejection. On the one side for children's and young people's well-being is the experience of their own significance in the relational structure: they are highly valued as an important support in the present and a promise for the future. On the other side, there are the restricted "self-processes" and the presence of violence. Such negative implications become more important for teenagers and young adults, however, the breakup with the family appears as an existential threat: as loss of a necessary network of support and an indispensable unit through which one is integrated into the wider society. Here, too, the absence of a welfare state of the kind familiar to more individualized societies is noticeable.

Institutions of the Kyrgyz welfare state are studied in *Elena Kim*'s contribution. focusing on what she calls "invisible ruling process dominating local activities and on prevailing narratives about the family, the state, and the roles of women and men therein."

The article draws on in-depth interviews with representatives of state-funded institutions of child protection to explore how the young victims of violence are made invisible by the dominant discourse of an "intact traditional Kyrgyz family" and what this cultural ideal of a patriarchal family means for the society. The results particu-

larly focus on the cases of adolescent girls affected by sexual violence (bride kidnapping and child marriage).

Finally, *Ekaterina Chicherina* asks in her contribution on the construction of girls' educational projects about the constraints and opportunities in the educational plans of Kyrgyz girls. Taking an intergenerational perspective, she draws on semi-structured interviews with adolescent girls and their mothers to look for continuities and transformations. The major changes of the Kyrgyz society in the last decades have considerable effects on female educational trajectories, she concludes. The frames within which girls may take decisions are strongly defined by their families and girls face gender-specific limitations and this affects their well-being. What Ekaterina Chicherina conceives of as the "social capital" of the family may easily become a source of control. This is especially true because little support or counseling can be mobilized outside the families, and the state instead extends the families' moral concern for their daughters into a moral panic about "national, social and moral security of the Kyrgyz nation".

These five contributions shed light about children and young people in the two countries that have received little research attention up to now. Each from a different perspective, these contributions show how children's and young people's well-being is often neglected in an alliance of patriarchal social institutions and families as central and indispensable societal value. The reasons for this could undoubtedly be seen in the massive social restructuring that these countries had to master within a short period of time. However, they could also represent the claim to follow their own social path, which does not want to exactly copy Western welfare state traditions because of different traditions and possibilities. Such a claim and its further development are critically accompanied by the contributions in this special section.

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