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## **Macroeconomics and Data on Children**

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## Abstract

Putting data on children into macroeconomic debate can be achieved in a variety of ways. Economic policy is about improving the lives of people and the most basic data of all concerning children – demographic data – can be used to underline this fact. The key economic variables on which economic policy operates can all be given a child dimension. And direct measures of various dimensions of child well-being must also be brought into the picture.

### 1. Remember the Purpose of Economic Policy

This paper considers some of the links between macroeconomics and data on children. Data may seem a dry subject to those who are not immersed in numbers in their daily work. To help motivate the discussion I therefore start by considering the purpose of economic policy. This leads on naturally to the first type of data on children relevant to the link with macroeconomics.

My examples in this introductory section and in much of the rest of the paper are taken from industrialized countries. Macroeconomics in the OECD area “has tended to become a remote and abstract subject, discussed in aggregate terms that seem far removed from the everyday experience of families” (Atkinson, 1998, p.2). It may be that the humanization of macroeconomics is an easier task in the developing world, where the conditions that many people live in are so obviously a cause for concern that no social science can ignore them with ease.<sup>1</sup>

Important economic events in both Western and Eastern Europe in recent years illustrate the need to remember the real purpose of economic policy. A UNICEF-IRC project on “European Monetary Union and Children” solicited the amused comment from one macroeconomist that this seemed to be a case of “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” – the title of Robert Pirsig’s cult book that combined two apparently quite disparate subjects.<sup>2</sup> But the Treaty on Union that lead to the single European currency stresses that the purpose of closer integration in Europe is one of “raising the standard of living and quality of life” (Article 2). Macroeconomic convergence and a single currency are merely vehicles to reach this goal of furthering the lives of Europe’s people.

Another example is provided by the transition in the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The goal here is to raise the living standards of the more than 400 million people in the region and to develop societies that are more humane and democratic than those that existed previously. The creation of free markets, the liberalisation of the region’s economies and the reduction in the role of the

<sup>1</sup> The humanization of the debate on structural adjustment in poor countries (e.g. Cornia et al., 1987) is now well accepted (although the degree to which policies have changed as a result is sometimes questioned).

<sup>2</sup> The papers by Atkinson (1998) and Micklewright and Stewart (1999), drawn on in this paper, form the output of the project.

state are important aspects of the transition process. But, like the single currency in Western Europe, they are merely some of the instruments for reaching the objective rather than the ultimate aims of what is taking place.<sup>3</sup>

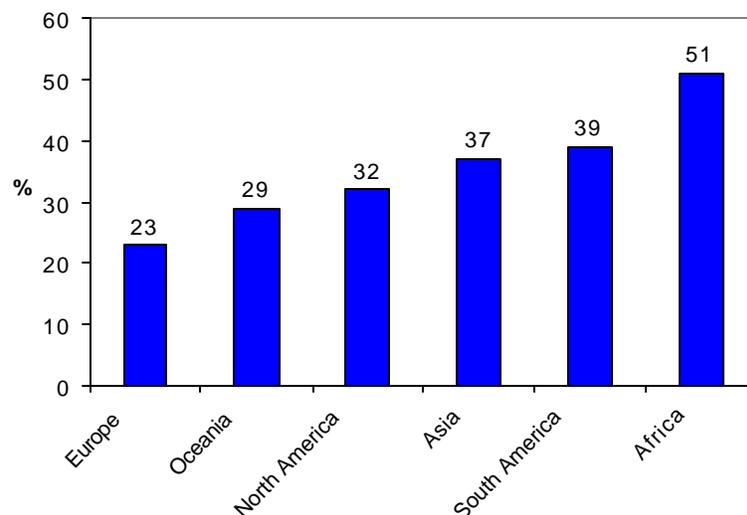
So economic policy is about people – including children as well as working-age adults and the elderly. How, then, can data be used to reinforce this link?

## 2. First Step – The Use of Demographic Data

If economic policy is about improving the lives of people then the first step in linking macroeconomics and children is a simple one. Data must be used to emphasize the quantitative importance of the child population.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of the world's population aged under 18, the default age cut-off for a child defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Six regions are distinguished. It is clear that children are far from being a group of marginal importance. Overall, 37 percent of the world's population are children. In Africa, children actually form the majority of the population. Even in Europe, with its much older age structure, nearly a quarter of the population are children. While figures of this kind may be familiar to advocates and researchers working on behalf of children, my impression is that they are not well-known to many of those responsible for economic policy.

Figure 1: *Children (aged 0-17) in the world's population (%)*

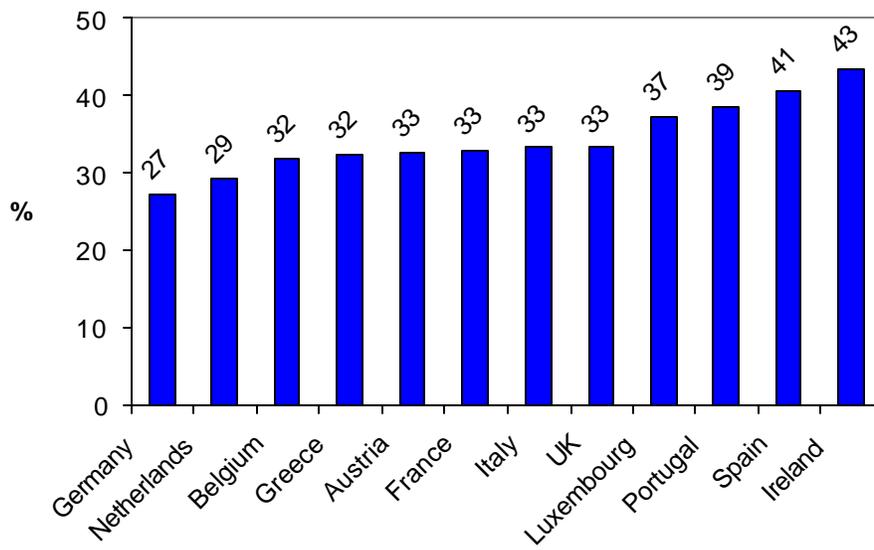


Source: UNICEF, *State of the World's Children*, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF-ICDC's work underlining the social side of the transition in the region is contained in a series of annual Regional Monitoring Reports (e.g. UNICEF, 1997, 1998, 1999).

Children therefore form a large fraction of the world's population. Many other people of course live with children and are concerned for their well-being. Demographic data can again be used to support this line of argument, adding further impetus to the drive to put children at the forefront of economic debate. Figure 2 shows the proportion of households in countries of the European Union that have a child aged 0-18 (the data do not identify the range 0-17 years defined by the UN Convention). The average figure is one-third, substantially higher than the share that children of this age form in the population. In Spain and Ireland over 40 percent of households contain a child. And the figure must be far higher than this in most developing countries where households containing more than two generations are very common.

Figure 2: *Proportion of households in EU countries with children (aged 0-18) (%)*



Source: Labour Force Survey Results 1997, Eurostat.

Demographic data are one of the most readily available forms of information on children. Their use in different ways should form a key part in any strategy to raise the profile of children in economic debate. To use a footballing analogy, there is an open goal yawning and the ball simply needs to be struck home.

### 3. Putting the Child Dimension into Economic Statistics

Economic statistics that enter the macroeconomic debate fall under various headings. These include:

- budgets
- interest rates

- prices
- incomes
- labour markets

Government budgets can be broken down with estimates made of the proportion devoted to children (e.g. Robinson and Biersteker, 1997). The figures will be sensitive to the assumptions made to attribute expenditures that are not clearly identified with a particular group in the population, but this does not mean that the exercise should not be attempted.<sup>4</sup> And even expenditures that are clearly aimed, formally, at adults often bring benefits to children. Recognizing this situation is a corollary of emphasising, as above, the proportion of *households* which contain children, households with adults who typically care about the well-being of children. For example, Case and Deaton (1998) note that expenditure on means-tested social pensions in South Africa results in money entering a household where there is a child in about 70 percent of cases and that a third of all children of African race (as opposed to coloured, Indian, or white) live in a household with a social pensioner.<sup>5</sup>

Discussion of government budgets and children needs to recognize the decentralized nature in many countries of much government expenditure relevant to children, especially that on education and health. A concern with child well-being thus implies a strong interest in systems of intergovernmental transfers. Are the governments of poorer regions getting the money they need to provide adequate services to children? (See, for example, the discussion of decentralization from a child welfare perspective in Klugman, 1997.)

Interest rates and prices are key macroeconomic variables. In commenting on the mechanisms for the impact on children of monetary union in Europe, Atkinson (1998) notes that measures are needed in economic models of the cost of borrowing for families, just as they have been developed for the cost of borrowing for firms. Macroeconomic models feature “the” interest rate but anyone who needs to borrow money knows that the cost of credit can vary enormously. The availability of credit and the terms on which any credit is granted will be quite different for a poor family than for others. The cost of living may also vary from household to household. A price index for families with children will differ from one for pensioners due to differences in expenditure patterns. (Atkinson calls for a European price index for families with children.)

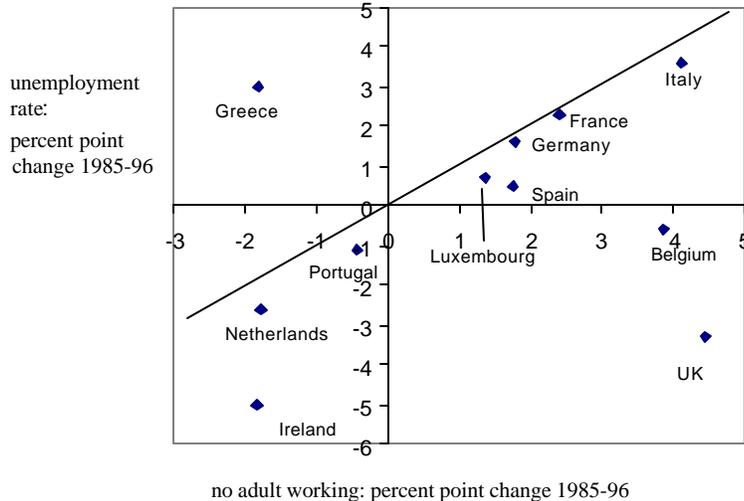
<sup>4</sup> The benefits of expenditures on pure “public goods” are impossible, by definition, to divide between particular groups in the population. (A public good is the term used in economics for a good where the consumption by one individual does not reduce the amount left for consumption by other persons.) For example, what share of the benefits of NATO’s nuclear umbrella goes to children?

<sup>5</sup> This is not of course to say that social pensioners necessarily put children first in their expenditure decisions or that those advocating on the behalf of children should be indifferent as to whether state transfers are directed explicitly to children or not. (Case and Deaton’s evidence for South Africa does not, for example, support the view that the elderly favour educational expenditures over other uses of funds.)

National income per head may be only a rough guide to the average income of families with children – or that of any other group. (The higher the share of households that contain a child the closer will average income per head proxy average incomes of households with children.) The position of households with children within the income distribution is a key issue here. The USA has the highest GNP per capita of any large country but despite this it ranks 12<sup>th</sup> in a group of 25 industrialized countries in terms of the proportion of children beneath a common absolute poverty line (Bradbury and J€ntti, 1999).<sup>6</sup>

The unemployment rate is a standard measure of the weakness of a country's labour market. But of more relevance for child well-being is the proportion of children living in a household where no adult works. Changes in the overall unemployment rate may not be a good guide to this. This is illustrated by Figure 3 which shows the change in unemployment between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s in European Union countries and the change over the same period in the proportion of households with children in which nobody works. (Both changes are expressed in percentage points.)

Figure 3: *Change in worklessness among families with children and change in unemployment: European Union, 1985-96*



Source: Micklewright and Stewart (1999)

Note: The unemployment rate is the economy-wide figure for all 25-54 year-olds while the no adult working rate refers to the percent of households with children (aged under 15) in which no adult works.

<sup>6</sup> The yardstick for absolute poverty was the official US poverty line (adjusted for differences in household composition) which was converted into the various countries' domestic currencies with purchasing power parity exchange rates. Note that the unit of the analysis in Bradbury and J€ntti's figures is the child and not the household – it is the proportion of all children who live in households that are poor that is of most interest rather than the incidence of poverty among households containing children.

Although a number of countries lie close to the 45 degree line (changes in the workless household rate mirroring changes in unemployment), in several, the workless household rate has moved in a way quite different to the unemployment rate. The UK stands out. Unemployment fell over 1985-96 in the UK by over 3 percentage points but the rate of worklessness among households with children rose by over 4 percentage points.<sup>7</sup>

## 4. Household Data versus Child Data

The discussion of data in the previous section related to the households in which children live – the incomes of such households, their labour market situation, the interest rates and prices they face, and so on. But we also need to consider direct measures of the children themselves rather than stopping at the level of the household.

There is intrinsic interest in various dimensions of the well-being of children *per se* (dimensions that by definition relate to them as individuals). This interest is reinforced by a lot of evidence collected by economists, anthropologists and sociologists which shows differences in living standards *within* households (e.g. Alderman et al, 1995). This challenges the assumption that the household should be treated as a single unit in which resources are shared equally. And it means that information on living standards at the household level, e.g. household income, is not sufficient to tell us how the children within each household are faring. It is for this reason that policy directed towards children may involve targeting resources on mothers rather than fathers. For example, child benefit payments may be allocated specifically to mothers on the presumption they are more likely to spend the money for the benefit of children than are fathers (for evidence on this see Lundberg et al., 1997). And data giving direct measures of child well-being not only allow the position of children relative to adults to be assessed, but also show differences between children. Of particular importance here are differences between boys and girls.

What dimensions of child well-being would one wish to measure and on which economic policy has an impact? The view taken here may depend on one's disciplinary background. The economist, for example, may see matters rather differently from the public health specialist. My own personal list includes the following:

- material well-being
- survival and health

<sup>7</sup> The contrast of the UK with Portugal is particularly striking. Portugal and the UK had the same labour force participation rate in 1996 for 25-54 year olds (83 per cent) and very similar unemployment rates (6.2 and 7.0 per cent, respectively, for the same age group). And yet there is a 16 per cent point gap between these two countries in the proportion of households with children with an adult in work (not shown in the diagram).

- education and development
- social inclusion (especially for teenagers)

Broadly speaking, these dimensions are contained in the UNDP Human Development Index and its derivatives and they reflect the approach to human well-being of the 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics, Amartya Sen who has placed emphasis on the "capabilities" to function and thrive in life (e.g. Sen 1992).

The first in the list, material well-being, can usually be measured only at the household level (by income or consumption). Notwithstanding the concerns expressed above, it is difficult to get adequate measures that relate specifically to children.

A number of indicators are relevant to children's survival and health. UNICEF's annual publication *State of the World's Children* ranks countries by their under-5 mortality rate. Together with infant and maternal mortality this is of major importance in its own right but it is also quite well correlated with other dimensions of well-being for which data are less readily available. Indeed, like demographic data, mortality data often have the attraction of being relatively abundant (typically permitting sub-national analyses with ease) and up-to-date. Child mortality responds well to investment in basic social services and to the raising of the incomes of the poor (see, for example, Anand and Ravallion, 1993). Sen has argued that mortality data are of considerable help in throwing light on countries' economic success or failure (Sen, 1995). Immunization rates are another indicator of considerable use and may have the advantage over mortality data of responding more quickly to economic adjustment.<sup>8</sup>

Education can be measured in various ways. Expenditure is the basic measure of "input", enrolment the standard measure of "process" or "access", and literacy the crudest measure of "output". Expenditure and enrolment (and, to an even greater extent, attendance and drop-out) have the fastest response to economic adjustment and have much to recommend them in this sense. However, this advantage must be traded off against the disadvantage that input and process indicators are not measures of the fundamental aim of an educational system, which is learning achievement, i.e. "output".

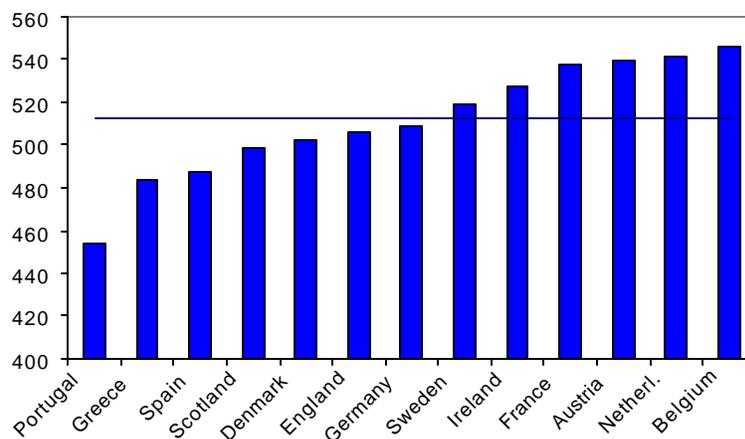
Figure 4 illustrates what data on learning achievement can reveal. It shows how mean scores in standardized tests of 8<sup>th</sup> grade children (13-14 year-olds) varied in the countries from the European Union that participated in the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) in 1994-95. There was

<sup>8</sup> Anthropometric status of young children, the most basic measures of which are height-for-age and weight-for-height, have much to recommend them as general welfare indicators and have a high degree of international comparability (Ismail and Micklewright, 1997). Low height-for-age is termed "stunting" and low weight-for-height "wasting". Stunting takes a considerable time to emerge implying that it will react only slowly to economic adjustment. Wasting emerges more quickly but the incidence of wasting does not discriminate very well between countries with markedly different living standards, a high rate of wasting typically emerging only in conditions of near famine.

significant variation, ranging from children in Belgium at the top who scored 20 percent higher on average than those in Portugal at the bottom. About half the countries were above the average for all 44 participating in the TIMSS and about half were below. These sort of data are a reminder that promoting high enrolment rates and minimising drop-outs are not the end of the story.<sup>9</sup>

The final dimension of child well-being listed above, “social inclusion”, is not a well-defined concept. Children should feel part of and feel valued by society. Young people may be particularly sensitive to this issue. Measurement here may be particularly difficult and could range from data on youth unemployment (on which economic policy often has a direct impact) to opinion poll evidence of how young people see their own lives (Micklewright and Stewart, 1999).

Figure 4: Average maths scores of 8<sup>th</sup> grade schoolchildren in the TIMSS: European Union countries, 1994-95



Source: Beaton et al. (1996). The horizontal line shows the unweighted mean of the average scores in all 44 countries participating in the TIMSS.

## 5. Conclusions

Putting data on children into macroeconomic debate can be achieved in a variety of ways that this paper has outlined only very briefly. Economic policy is about improving the lives of people and the most basic data of all concerning children – demographic data – can be used to underline this fact. The key economic variables on which economic policy operates can all be given a child dimension. And direct measures of various dimensions of child well-being must also be brought into the picture.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, the variation in achievement *within* countries is also important to know about and the TIMSS data can be used to shed light on this subject as well (e.g. Micklewright, 1999).

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