

Investing in knowledge for evidence-based social policies for children: two case studies of knowledge dissemination initiatives in the Eastern Caribbean

Koen Rossel-Cambier, Tom Olsen and Niloufar Pourzand

Small Islands Development States (SIDS), such as the Eastern Caribbean countries, have increased needs for knowledge-based responses to social needs. Contrary to the belief that income increase alone would eliminate poverty and social exclusion, the region is witnessing the paradoxical co-existence of middle- and high-income societies and unequal income distribution leading to important social and economic disparities.

Various knowledge generation initiatives have been initiated to tackle social and economic challenges, but often they insufficiently reach the end users. Different development organisations and national agencies invest huge amounts of financial and human resources in knowledge, but do not always succeed in matching this knowledge with decision making and policy shaping stakeholders and initiatives.

Further, experience shows that economic and social policies are seldom child- or gender-neutral. Sustainable improvements in the situation of women and children require a supportive knowledge-driven policy environment, as well as operational interventions to help develop their basic capabilities.

This paper describes two case-studies supported by the Eastern Caribbean office¹ of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the light of its sub-regional knowledge function around social policy for children's rights. It argues why not only knowledge generation, but also knowledge dissemination is especially important for the social policy and how this can be realized.

The lens of a knowledge function

Within UNICEF globally, there is a relative and growing consensus that a knowledge function should be different than knowledge management, being broader and more inclusive in scope (UNICEF, 2006). The knowledge function includes all elements of identification, generation, management and use of knowledge. Knowledge management concerns itself primarily with the

¹ UNICEF has an office for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean region (UNICEF ECO) based in Bridgetown, Barbados which covers 10 countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Turks and Caicos Islands, and British Virgin Islands.

organization, integration, sharing and delivery of knowledge; an interlinked subset of UNICEF's knowledge function. Figure 1 reflects how UNICEF views knowledge leveraging as a policy influencing mechanism for children's rights.

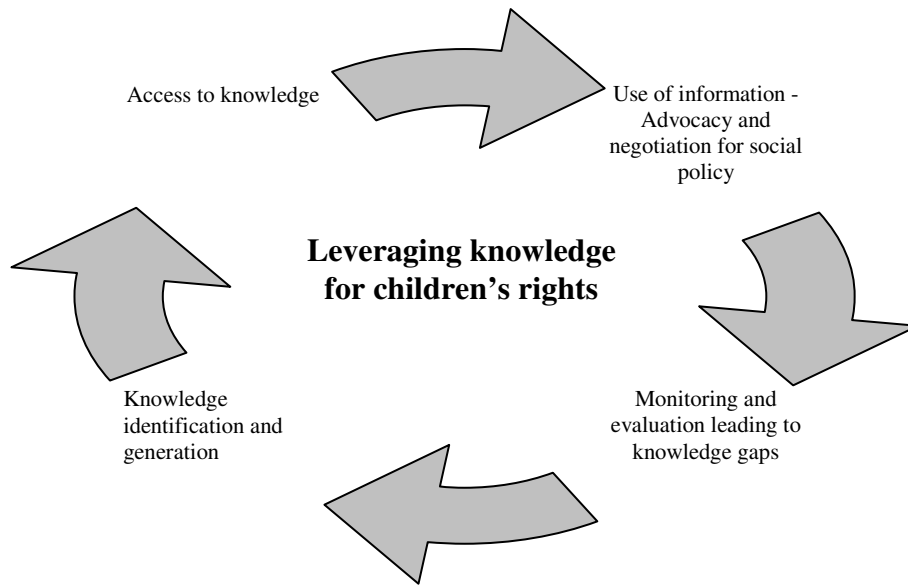


Figure 1. Leveraging knowledge-based policy for children' rights in the Eastern Caribbean

(source: author)

In this cycle, a first and crucial step is *the generation and identification* of information. In the Caribbean region a lot of data gaps exist. The concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of the different countries of the Eastern Caribbean have underlined the lack of adequate national data collection systems to understand and deal with child rights. Various sources report a significant quantity of missing data, inconsistent definitions and several anomalies of key social indicators in the Eastern Caribbean (UNDP/OECS, 2003). Different initiatives are being undertaken to fill the existing data gaps. The statistical office of the government of Dominica for example has developed a pragmatic step-by-step planning approach in order to close the data gaps relating to the millennium development goals.

Next, once information is available, it is important to ensure that the key stakeholders have timely *access* to the information. Often, despite huge investments in data generation activities, this aspect is underestimated, and information remains locked within the hard drives of a limited number of desktop computers. As a result, there is a trend for re-inventing policy initiatives without taking stock of evidence on past experiences and lessons learned.

As policy commitments are not always followed-up with adequate policy frameworks, financial allocations and human resources, *monitoring* is essential, in order to assess whether the commitments are being made and ensured. *Evaluation*, in particular formative evaluation, enables feedback after interventions and allows the planners to review and adjust policies and interventions in order to better reach the results. This in turn can contribute to *identifying new knowledge needs* and generating new data, which will be fed into the knowledge function cycle.

To ensure that decision makers indeed use the information for policy interventions, various *advocacy strategies* can be undertaken. Ensuring knowledge is put to use is the best way to convince policy makers for commitment to knowledge interventions. Such knowledge comprises not only statistical data, but also qualitative data, implementation capacity evaluations of programmes, budget analyses and international legal commitments.

This paper describes two case studies which are contributing to the access to knowledge for children's rights in the Eastern Caribbean. The first case study deals with the roll-out of *DevInfo*, a database system which increases harmonised datacapture, storage, presentation and dissemination of vital development indicators. The second case study deals with the mapping and dissemination of existing policies, legislations, budgets and monitoring frameworks in order to build a more common coherent knowledge base, use and application for its key stakeholders.

Case-study: the roll-out of DevInfo as a knowledge dissemination platform in the Eastern Caribbean

The need to access to national statistical datasets

Knowledge generation initiatives such as surveys and censuses create statistical data intended for policy making, planning and administrative processes. Moreover, the accurate collection and reporting of administrative statistical data is an important information source for understanding the evolution of key social issues, particularly related to education, social protection and health.

The various knowledge generation initiatives are aimed at enabling policy makers to steer and adapt policy and plan the necessary inputs, comprising human and financial resources, for administrative responses to social and economic trends and needs. Other knowledge and data sources include reference documents for research undertakings and may lay at the heart of investment and planning operations for the private sector.

Much of the essential data comes from the national population and housing censuses, which in the Eastern Caribbean region took place between 1999 and 2001. The countries periodically undertake various household surveys, such as the Surveys of Living Conditions (SLC, for instance in Saint Lucia and Jamaica), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS – for instance

Surinam and Guyana), Labour Force Surveys (LFS – for instance Barbados) and Household surveys. Unfortunately, the outcomes of many surveys and knowledge generation initiatives are often little accessible, even so many years later, and governments pay insufficient attention to ensuring their use by potential end-users. As a result, datasets face different challenges: Dealing with a multitude of data, and efficiently organizing it; effectively presenting and using data; facilitating exchange of data; and increasing harmonization, standardization and comparability of data structures between countries.

In response to these challenges, the DevInfo software tool was developed as a possible response for nationally-owned and user-friendly data dissemination.

About DevInfo

DevInfo is a database system, developed under UN partnership and adapted from UNICEF ChildInfo (the predecessor to DevInfo) technology. Following the successful deployment of ChildInfo in more than 80 countries over the last ten years, a 2002 assessment concluded that ChildInfo, with certain modifications, would be an appropriate tool to support the monitoring of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at country level. This resulted in the DevInfo tool.

The product, distributed royalty-free to all end users, has been designed for broad ownership in terms of branding and packaging, but is customizable to country-specific requirements. The database maintains indicators by time periods and geographic areas to monitor commitments to sustained human development. It also generates tables, graphs and maps for reports and presentations, for usage by for instance national statistics offices, UN agencies, donors, NGOs and civil society. The system has been endorsed by the UN Development Group and is being used in many countries to help track the progress made towards achievement of the MDGs and other national priorities.

The latest version of DevInfo has evolved from a decade of innovations in database systems that support informed decision making and which promote the use of data to advocate for human development. It includes significant advancements in handling metadata, conforming to standardized information sharing models for metadata storage and dissemination. These metadata standards have fostered five advantages: first, they allow for more efficient data exchange and for harmonization of international and national data sets. Second, they decentralize data maintenance, lower the reporting burden on data producers and reduce duplication of effort. Third, they foster use of more timely and better quality data. Fourth, they shift the process of data distribution from ‘push’ to ‘pull’ among its users, providing access as and when new data are published. Fifth, they allow for data exchange among applications on a broad spectrum of platform.

DevInfo 5.0 is compliant with three international metadata standards for indicators, data sources and digital maps (SDMX, DDI and ISO 11179, and ISO 19115:2003 for metadata on digital maps).

HelenInfo

Various Caribbean countries have developed national DevInfo systems which enable the storage and dissemination of national statistical data, such as Haiti (DevInfo Haiti; since 2003), the Dominican Republic (DomInfo; since 2007), Saint Lucia (HelenInfo; since 2007) and Jamaica (JamStats; two phases: 2003 and 2005) This case study will focus on the case of St.Lucia.

Less than one year after a capacity building initiative in 2006, St.Lucia launched, as the first Eastern Caribbean country and with support of UNICEF, CARICOM, EU and UNDP, its national version of the DevInfo information tool, called 'HelenInfo'. This tool allows for the collection and presentation of its key national data by indicators, time periods and geographical areas. The HelenInfo package includes a small publication and an installation CD with statistics on inter-census demographic trends, the MDGs and the local socio-economic environment. The software, with has both a desk-top and web-based platform, is currently being presented as a platform for inter-agency cooperation and continuous data collection. HelenInfo was presented to public sector senior management and to the relevant government ministries and support agencies such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Transformation, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the European Development Fund.

The St.Lucia experience has exposed various factors which influence the realization of local DevInfo roll-out: national ownership and commitment; the availability of qualified human resources; the existence of a basic IT infrastructure; the possibility of leveraging through different sources of donor support; and the access to training and information.

Feedback from the St.Lucian department of statistics revealed that the software is particularly convenient for work in Small Island Development States (SIDS): it conforms to standardized information sharing models for metadata storage and dissemination, which contribute to decentralization of data maintenance, lowering the reporting burden for data producers, and reducing duplication of effort.

The roll-out of DevInfo in the CARICOM region

The CARICOM Secretariat has assessed the role that DevInfo can play in the harmonization and quality improvement of data gathering and sharing in the Caribbean. Its statistical department is currently finalizing its own CARICOM Info appliance of DevInfo to stock and share its databases. The Secretariat is taking leadership in the roll-out, monitoring and support of DevInfo for its member states and currently undertakes technical assistance to Barbados, Dominica, Guyana, Surinam, St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Trinidad and Tobago are also finalizing their nationally owned DevInfo information sharing platform.

In the CARICOM region, DevInfo has increasingly become the common data harmonisation platform and can, in the light of the upcoming 2010 Census, also become the platform of census data exchange and dissemination. A joint DevInfo template, CARICOM CensusInfo, is available for adaptation to the core module questionnaires, and in November 2007, the

CARICOM Regional Census Coordinating Committee (RCCC) officially endorsed DevInfo as the leading data dissemination tool for census information.

Case study: social policy mapping for children in the Eastern Caribbean

Towards a more coherent approach for knowledge sharing

Many policy initiatives start off without taking stock of the experience and existence of already existing policy frameworks, initiatives, commitments, programmes, case studies, reports and legislations. There is often incompatibility or overlap between national, regional and international initiatives for social purposes because they are not aware of each others' existence. This can lead to a situation of limited accountability and follow-up of commitments made in terms of existing policy commitments, legislation, budgets and monitoring and research studies, especially in small island development states, where the capacity of governments is limited to comply with different reporting and data gathering obligations.

With relation to children's rights in the Caribbean for example, various regional initiatives such as the 1996 Belize Commitment to Action and the 2000 Kingston Initiative on Children and Social Policy both tackled very relevant issues for the children in the Caribbean, but have received low follow-up in terms of their commitments. This can be explained in part by the lack of regional knowledge dissemination and monitoring mechanisms.

Linking and disseminating policy initiatives: social policy mapping for children in the Eastern Caribbean

In order to build a knowledge database for child-friendly policies, UNICEF ECO has developed a mapping tool for the existing social policy frameworks. The tool, 'Social Policy Mapping for Children in the Eastern Caribbean', is a database available on CD-ROM and through Internet [<http://www.unicef.org/lac/spbarbados>].

The database contains more than 500 documents following the key subject intervention areas of UNICEF in the Eastern Caribbean region within the Social Policy Framework for Children: general social policy issues, child protection, HIV/AIDS, youth, early childhood development and emergency preparedness. It is continuously updated and is further organized following three parameters: geography, theme and the social policy action area, according to international, regional, subregional and national levels. It comprises the following documents:

- Planning documents: analyses of socio-economical problem areas with recommendations or concrete action plans to deal with them;
- Legal and human rights documents: existing and model legislation and their reporting focusing on the different child-related development and protection areas;
- Financial documents: budgeting reports and financial statements as well as child or gender budgeting exercises; and

- Implementation and monitoring documents: reports or publications documenting experiences in delivering social services, technical cooperation, networking, advocacy, monitoring and evaluation in key child-related social development areas.

The tool has been disseminated to all relevant policy makers and stakeholders dealing with children's rights; initial feedback has been positive. The database is the first of its kind to focus on existing child-rights oriented documents which can serve as an institutional and policy reference for intervention in children's issues in the Eastern Caribbean. Based on this success, the UNICEF Office of Egypt is currently preparing a similar social policy mapping initiative.

Analyzing the social policy mapping data – striking results

This concerted effort towards bringing together different knowledge sources has allowed UNICEF ECO to appreciate the advancement of certain child-sensitive issues in the subregion, but also to develop a crossed analysis of linkages and follow-up of commitments, whether political, legal or financial. The analysis is summarized in 20 observations and 23 recommendations for UNICEF action in the Eastern Caribbean.

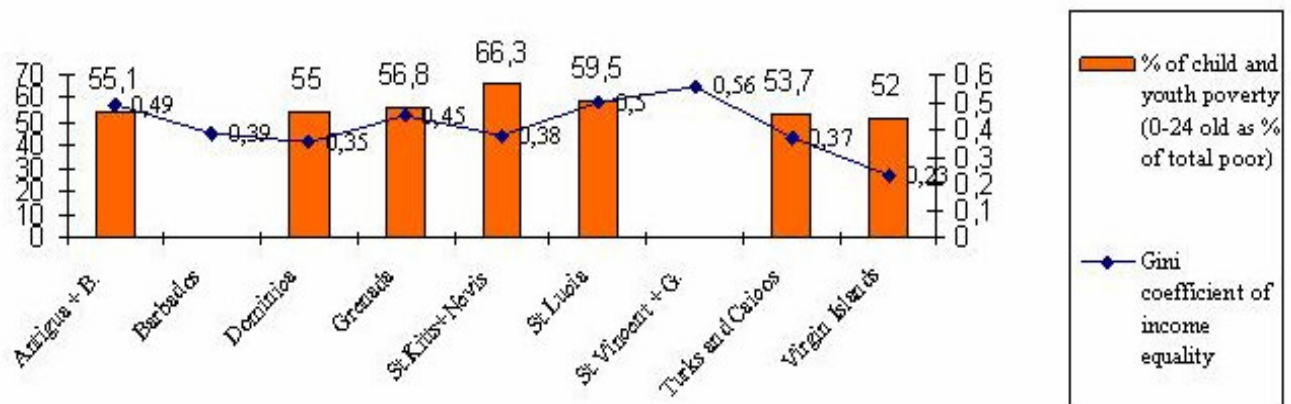


Figure 2: Child and youth poverty and social inequality in the Eastern Caribbean

(Source: compilation of various datasets from draft and final Country Poverty Assessments (CPAs) 1997-2006)

One major observation was the striking high level of child and youth poverty in the Eastern Caribbean. Child poverty lies at the heart of social exclusion in the region, and children and youth are most adversely affected by its social exclusion mechanisms, expressed by high levels of child abuse, teenage pregnancies, HIV prevalence, youth unemployment, school-based and domestic violence, drug abuse, drop-outs and gender inequality. Statistical analysis illustrates the alarming level of inequality in the OECS (Organization of Eastern Caribbean States) region. This is reflected in the graph below comprising a representation of the regional Gini coefficients, a quantitative measure of income inequality ranging from 0 to 1, whereby the higher the coefficient, the higher the inequality of the income distribution. The graph shows for instance a coefficient of 0.56 in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, whereas this is usually around

0.25 in high income countries. Of all the countries represented below, more than half of the poor are children or youth. The highest incidence of child and youth poverty was recorded in St. Kitts and Nevis, where close to two out of three poor people are younger than 24 years old (own compilation of CPA statistics, CDB 2000).

The need for knowledge-driven responses to child poverty and exclusion

A lesson drawn from the knowledge mapping experience is that many of the existing problems for children in the Eastern Caribbean can be limited if a coherent policy response is provided. A 2001 OECS Secretariat report confirms this, with the overall conclusion that “a major challenge to the promotion of sustainable human development in the OECS is the absence of a coherent and well-articulated framework to shape the evolution of social policy.” There is a need to bring the social and child-rights dimension more explicitly, consistently and effectively into the formulation of national and regional poverty reduction and development strategies.

Knowledge-driven policy should not only refer to statistics, but also to national legislation and to national commitments made towards international legislation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) Observations of the National State Reports stressed the inadequacy of legislative reform of many countries. Inconsistencies relate to issues of non-discrimination on the grounds of age; obligations for the best interest of the child as a primary consideration in judiciary and administrative processes; the continuing access problems of children and women to juridical and legal services; and the need for enhancing national policies from a child perspective.

Other pertinent knowledge involves insight into national budgeting processes. Various countries’ governments have made substantial efforts in investing in basic social services, but in various countries actual expenditures have decreased. The high level of debt burden in many countries hampers sustainable public funding for social sectors.

However, various social sectors face a weak institutional capacity for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of social policy programmes, which impacts on children’s rights. Overall, the mapping exercise has helped bring to the forefront the importance of understanding and monitoring implementation mechanisms.

Conclusion

Knowledge dissemination and leveraging can contribute to more effective policy shaping, building on experience and lessons learned. Various development actors have indeed invested in the identification and generation of knowledge, but often they have insufficiently focused on its dissemination. This is in particular relevant in the Eastern Caribbean where poverty and inequality can be considered as the greatest threat to development and security in the region (UN ECLAC, 2007). To deal with this complex situation, affecting mostly children and youth, there is a need for better knowledge dissemination in order to support the understanding,

planning, financing and implementation of evidence-based and rights-oriented social policy interventions.

Understanding future trends for children requires a strong knowledge scanning system in place. In the rapidly changing world the capacity for scanning the environment is crucial for anticipating issues and opportunities for children's rights, providing more accurate, more timely and higher quality knowledge. Correcting social inequities and vulnerabilities from the earliest stage possible – childhood – is likely to increase effectiveness of development interventions.

Key to effective knowledge interventions is the capacity to foster and monitor change, aimed at prioritizing local social policy for children. A coherent approach is needed, as certain goals may not be achieved on a programme basis, but require a longer-term vision.

Understanding social problems, and formulating policies and programmes to address them, can only be effective if the intended beneficiaries are at the core of the process. This can be done by involving schools, early childhood development centres, youth groups or professional practitioners in devising innovative practice and forms of organization to deal with child vulnerability at the local level. Capitalizing on these experiences can provide a valuable evidence base to further improve public policies and measure cost-effective and sustainable ways for change management and innovation.

Note

This study is based on the collective work of the UNICEF Eastern Caribbean Office (ECO). Commentaries represent the personal views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect UNICEF positions.

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Abstract

In the Eastern Caribbean various knowledge initiatives are underway. Unfortunately, this knowledge does not always reach its intended end-users. There is a need to leverage knowledge in order to halt the explicit trend of child poverty and exclusion. A knowledge

function for social policy should be geared towards knowledge identification, generation and access. Greater development results can be achieved if focus is put on the design, monitoring and evaluation of social policies on four different levels: planning, legislation, financing and implementation. To this extent, UNICEF Eastern Caribbean Office (ECO) promotes practical knowledge dissemination tools such as DevInfo and the Social Policy Mapping for Children database in order to ensure that the different stakeholders use and build on knowledge to develop and implement child-friendly policies.

About the authors

Koen Rossel-Cambier, a Belgian economist (M.A. in Applied Economic Sciences, International Relations, Education and International Trade), is Social Policy Consultant with UNICEF in the Eastern Caribbean. He has written different papers and guidebooks on pro-poor social protection, gender, combined micro-finance and monitoring and evaluation. For the last 12 years, he has worked with various development agencies such as the ILO, the World Bank and Belgian Cooperation in over 30 low and middle-income countries mainly in Africa and the Caribbean. He is also member of the Centre for European Research in Micro-Finance (CERMi).
E-mail: krosselcambier@unicef.org or koenrc@yahoo.com

Tom Olsen, a Norwegian National, is a graduate from the Royal Norwegian Navy Academy in Management and Logistics and has an MBA from the Kristiansand Business School. Currently, he is the Resident Representative of the UNICEF Office for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean. Prior to this, he was the UNICEF State Representative in Orissa, India and worked for UNICEF in Angola. Before joining UNICEF in 1999, he held various senior positions with private and public companies including the Scandinavian Cement Ltd (SCANCEM), the Norwegian Government, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).
E-mail: tolsen@unicef.org

Niloufar Pourzand is Iranian and has a PhD in Sociology, Gender and Ethnic Studies. She has worked for UNICEF in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and now Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean where she is Deputy Representative. She has published a number of academic publications on gender, education and identity in Afghanistan, in addition to the many UNICEF documents for which she has been responsible. She has worked in emergency and non-emergency duty stations, as well as in least developed, developing and middle income countries.
E-mail: npourzand@unicef.org