Combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation of clients of the Public Centres of Social Action/Welfare (Brussels, 20-21 September 2012)

Combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation[1]

Minna Salmi[2]

National Institute of Health and Welfare (THL)

1. A brief assessment of the possible relevance and the learning value of the Belgian policy to Finland

In Finland, local authorities have a significant role in the production of all services directed to the citizens. They are responsible for children's basic growth environments (day care centres and schools), services aimed to support growth (child health clinics and school health care) as well as offering possibilities to sports and other activities for children and adolescents (sports centres, swimming halls, youth houses, places to practice in for bands etc.). Access to these services is mostly free of charge or the price is low. To fund the services, municipalities have a power to collect taxes but they also receive state subsidies. Local authorities make independent decisions on how to use the money; hence, the level, accessibility and quality of services vary from one municipality to another.

While general income transfers to families with children are funded by state taxation, municipalities pay the basic income support to people or families entitled to it. The income support consists of a basic and a discretionary support, and local authorities make decisions on which expenses can be covered with the discretionary support.

A significant difference compared to many other EU countries is that Finnish children have a universal entitlement to day care services after the parental leave has ended (at this stage the child is approximately 10 months old). Fees are progressive with a maximum of €264 a month and a 0-class for lowest income families.[3]

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[2] Dr. Minna Salmi is a sociologist. She works as Research Manager in National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) where her areas of research are well-being of families with children, work–family reconciliation and family policy. Minna Salmi is responsible for the text except for part 3.

[3] The income criteria for different fee categories are not harmonised with the income levels related to poverty risk. Thus also families whose incomes are below poverty risk may end up paying for day care services. In 2010, 4% of day care service recipients paid no fees and 27% paid the highest fees (Säkkinen 2011).

Attendance of day care services varies according to the child's age. In 2010, 37% of 1-2-year-olds and 67% of 3-5-year-olds attended day care services (THL, Day Care Statistics). Children less than one year old are to 99% taken care of at home supported by family leave schemes, and six-year-olds attend preschool. Children receive free breakfast, lunch and a snack in day care centres and free warm lunch at school. School-aged children also receive a free bus ticket or attend organised school transport if they live far from school (the criterion for the relevant distance is defined in each municipality).

Children attending 1st and 2nd grade in school can have access to after-school care in case the municipality where the child lives has decided to organise this activity (to organise the service is not mandatory, but if the municipality decides to do so, the service must be offered to children on 1st and 2nd grade; however, local authorities decide how many children can have the service). Most municipalities organise this service, and roughly half of children on 1st grade and one in four children on 2nd grade attend after-school care. The expenses are covered (2007) to 57% with a state subsidy and to 30% by the municipalities, the rest being covered with fees (flat-rate fees, at maximum EUR 80 a month for four hours per day). After-school care is organised by a variety of actors from schools and municipal playgrounds to sport clubs and NGOs. Hence also the educational background of the instructors is diverse. This means that activities in the after school clubs vary from strictly guided school-like activities to competitive sports and free play. (Iivonen 2009; Strandell 2012.)

Third sector organisations and parishes have an important role also in the organisation of free-time and hobby activities for children. For this work they receive state support. Municipalities, NGOs and parishes also organise summer camps for children.

The Belgian PCSA/W policy is aimed at supporting active participation of minors in social, recreational, cultural, sporting, and civic activities. According to the evaluation report, "most of the funding is used for educational support (for example on paying unpaid school bills, school meals, books, bus passes, excursions, preschool/after school care and paramedical support such as speech therapy, medication or baby formula, orthodontist or optician bills)". These activities or services are often free of charge in Finland. Part of them, such as children's hobbies, may be covered with the discretionary income support for low-income families. Here is a similarity with the Belgian model where, according to the evaluation study, "the degree and use of the resources was often dependent on local policy decisions". Local libraries offer access to PCs and the Internet.

In Finland, the need for supporting children's active participation concerns especially the possibility to take part in hobby activities which can be quite expensive. Support to the fees of for example sport organisations or music schools, as well as buying the necessary equipment, is needed in families which live under poverty risk. Also support to buying PCs and books for children and to attending cultural activities (such as theatre visits organised by schools) would be needed. However, a possibility to establish a state grant or state subsidised measure to ensure children's right to socio-cultural participation has not been on the political agenda in Finland. Here the Belgian model might give inspiration for further activity.

Some municipalities offer "a culture passport" to varying age groups of children to support their attendance of cultural activities (theatre, concerts, movies, art galleries, museums etc.). This kind of voucher model has similarities with the

Belgian model and is worth considering more widely. However, in its feedback to an initiative of introducing a culture passport for children in Helsinki, the local authorities point out that the city has launched a "culture to schools" project which aims at increasing co-operation between schools and the different culture institutions of the city especially in areas with a high number of children under risk of marginalisation. Also day care centres introduce the city's culture supply to children and co-operate with the local libraries, the authorities point out. This is all good, but interesting in the light of recent history: during the economic crisis of the 1990s resources for this type of activities, as well as afternoon clubs with hobby activities at schools, were cut in all municipalities and not reintroduced during the years of economic growth later on (see part 4).

The Belgian model gives a good example of an arrangement where one centre offers support with a wide range of problems (housing, medical assistance, psychosocial issues, labour issues, debt mediation, finding crisis shelter, energy costs, and also for financial and practical support to participate in social, cultural and sporting activities). This is an approach which has been under preparation in Finland especially as regards children and their families. The "family centres" would gather some of the areas of the Belgian model under one roof. The Belgian model has good learning value in this development work.

2. How to overcome possible barriers to children's socio-cultural participation?

As yet, there is little research in Finland on the connection of the family's economic situation and the child's hobby activities or other participation. In a survey from 2006 to families with children under 18 years of age, half of families who had difficult to make ends meet say that they cannot afford hobbies subject to charge to their children while this was the case in 26% of all families (Salmi et al. 2009). However, in a study made during the economic crisis of the 1990s, the parents seldom reported of economising on children's free-time activities; this was the last object of cuts in a list of 12 items (Salmi et al. 1996).

Single parent families can less often (62%) than families on average (74%) afford hobbies subject to charge (Salmi et al. 2009). Single parent families are female-headed in 87% of the cases and poor single parents are women even more often (90%) than single parents on average. There is a gender element in poverty also as regards two-parent families: the lower the family income, the more often the main provider is the mother. (Statistics Finland, Family Statistics and Income Distribution Statistics.)

We know that the parents', and especially the mother's, education level has a connection with risks of marginalisation (Paananen et al 2011). This tempts to a conclusion that to socio-culturally engage children with less engaged parents might be a greater challenge than if the parents themselves are active. To engage children in the youngest age groups creates a special challenge as it requires the involvement of at least one parent which is not necessarily the case with older children.

In Finland approximately one in three poor families with children are single parent families. As was mentioned, poor single parent families are mostly female-headed. This should be taken into consideration when co-operation with parents is planned to strengthen children's possibilities of socio-cultural participation.

Children and adolescents with multicultural background also have more difficulty than others to afford hobby activities. In a study of young people's (10-29-year-

olds) free-time from 2009 the results were compared with a study of the free-time of multicultural young people from 2005. Among 13-25-year-olds with a Finnish ethnic background 18% reported that they do not have enough money to participate in free-time activities while among the multicultural youngsters the percentage was 24%. (Myllyniemi 2009.)

There are some models developed in Finland which might be of interest when we discuss the socio-cultural participation of children and adolescents, also the youngest children. Characteristic to these models is a direct engagement with the children/adolescents:

In the Storycrafting method, where the child tells a story of a defined subject to the adult, the adult commits the story to paper and then reads it to the child who checks that it is as s/he intended. This method has been used with children of different age. (Karlsson 2009.)

"Art as source of knowledge" is a heading for a group of methods developed for professional work with children and adolescents in child welfare institutions since the beginning of the 2000s. Development methods based on culture and art aim to get close to emotions and experiences and to enhance the scope for using one's own and common resources. Autobiographical work with children and adolescents enables personal and professional experiences to be interwoven, enlivens professionalism, making interaction more rewarding and promoting coping and a related awareness of one's own limits. Drama exercises stir up impressive discussions on how children can be touched, how they experience things, and what is their position in relation to the institution in general. Masks, paintings, photos, songs, poems and videos are not only tools that allow us to express ourselves but also shields that allow us to maintain privacy. The work continues today within a programme "Art and Culture for Well-being" coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. (Art and Culture for Well-being - proposal for an action programme 2010–2014 (pdf, 850 kt))

Empowering photography is a method created by a professional photographer and social worker originally in her work with adolescent girls who were taken in custody. The project started form the observation that the verbal methods traditionally used in social work were not enough to analyse the girls' experiences, interactive relations and perception of themselves. Even if the method is based on photography, the photograph is not the point but the focus is on ways to see and look at one self and at each other. The process of empowering photography is a way to learn an interactive way to encounter people near to you, work mates or clients. The method teaches you to find and make visible the often hidden valuable, good and meaningful aspects of the everyday reality. (http://www.voimauttavavalokuva.net/english/index.htm)

The Myrsky (Storm)-project aims at strengthening young people's social participation through art-making. In Myrsky professional artists of different art forms make art together with young people between 12-29 years of age. The projects are primarily targeted at youth who would be difficult to reach by conventional means. The content of the projects is designed together with the participants themselves. Funded by The Finnish Cultural Foundation in 2008-2011, Myrsky organised 87 art projects directed at youth in different parts of Finland. In all, about 14,000 young people participated in the projects. In the spring of 2011 Myrsky became part of Finnish Children and Youth Foundation's activities. The Foundation supports local projects by giving funding and organising training. (http://www.myrsky.info/in-english/)

Icehearts is a model created 1996 for improving child welfare. With the help of team sports, Icehearts aims to prevent social exclusion, to promote social skills and to provide a secure, long-term adult commitment throughout the child´s life. Each team functions for 12 years. Eligible in the team are children who need special support and children who otherwise would not have a possibility to take part in hobby activities. Typically the team members are boys from immigrant or single parent families or families with many children. The coaches literally fetch the children from home if they do not show up in practice. Icehearts is a non-profit organisation that works closely together with professionals from social services and schools as well as with the children´s homes. (http://www.icehearts.fi/?sivu=English)

3. What policy domains and levels are relevant and how can an integrated and coordinated approach be achieved?

Arto Koho

Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

The basic principles of family policy in Finland highlight that children are a part of a vital society and that society is responsible for taking care of children and families. Besides we know that situations and needs of the families vary in a life span. These premises altogether mean that family policy and its measures should be based on a universal approach. Security schemes are meant to all residents. Broad family policy goals cover creating of such environments where children can live and grow up safely and where levelling of the costs due to children is the bottom line as well.

Therefore family services are important as such and as a totality covering a broad area of activities. Maternity and child care clinics put their focus mainly on good standard of health. But the clinics support developmental potential of children and families at the same time. That dualism is true with regard to other services as well, e.g. with regard to the activities of early childhood education and care, family centres, home services, school health care, family counselling and child protection.

Recent policy lines in the Finnish Family Policy have been quite family and children friendly, at least in words. The latest government programmes have prioritised children and families. The Ombudsman for Children was established in Finland 2005. The former government had a specific policy programme for the well-being of children, youth and families 2007-2011. New Act on Child Welfare was given out 2008 and the Decree on maternity and child health clinics, school and student health services and preventive oral health for children and adolescents during the next year. Some family benefits have been raised quite recently. Resources have been allocated to the development of services for children, adolescents and families. The primary services that support development and prevent problems are developed in an integrated way. Public authorities and all service providers are presumed to work with integrated schemes. In special services institutional focus is tried to dismantle.

The current government programme highlights early childhood education. The programme states that high quality and easily accessible early childhood and preschool education will be secured for all in this age group. A new early childhood education act will be introduced. In preparation the possibility of making pre-primary education compulsory will be explored with an aim to securing the participation of whole age cohort in early childhood education. And preschool education and basic education will be developed and provided to the entire age group, guaranteeing equal opportunities for everyone.

A new fish is that law-drafting, administration and steering concerning early childhood education and day care services will be transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture. And it is mentioned in this connection that cooperation between early childhood education and social welfare and health care services will be enhanced.

In addition the current government programme mentions that support will be provided to enable parents with small children to combine family and work in a flexible manner. A specific emphasis is given to the following details:

- Children's day care will be maintained as a subjective right.
- The day care system will be developed to offer families with more flexible opportunities to use day care services. Safe and high quality children's day care will be secured.
- Day care will be developed as a service preventing social exclusion, and will be maintained free of charge for families on a low income. Any charges collected will not form a barrier to employment. Special attention will be paid to the position of single parents.
- The right to keep the same day care placement will be maintained even if a child is temporarily in home care.

The present government also set up a horizontal programme to diminish marginalisation, poverty and health problems. The aim of the programme is to create a permanent model to mainstream promoting of well-being and health and diminishing inequality in all decision-making and in the activity of all ministries. The steering group of the programme consists of representatives of seven ministries, the central organisation of local authorities, central labour market organisations and experts from several fields. One of the seven goals of the programme is to diminish marginalisation of children and young people.

In general, the co-operation of different ministries as regards child policy is enhanced through a developmental programme for child and youth policy which is compiled every fourth year. The present programme for 2012-2015 realises for its part the goals to diminish poverty, inequality and marginalisation written into the government's programme. One of the strategic aims of the child and youth policy programme is that children and young people can on an equal basis take part in cultural, exercise and free-time activities.

Another coordinating body is the Ombudsman for children which is a state authority established by parliamentary legislation in 2005. The post is independent but located within the administrative framework of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The duty of the Ombudsman for Children is to promote the interests of children and the implementation of their rights on a general societal level together with other actors in the field. The Ombudsman's collaborative partners in this work are other authorities, municipalities, churches, non-governmental organisations, researchers and other actors and specialists in the area of child policy. The Ombudsman has been active in getting children's participation on the political agenda and also gathered information from children themselves of their opinions as regards their well-being at school and free-time activities.

4. General remarks on child poverty and marginalisation risks in Finland

In her discussion paper Mary Daly writes that Finland belongs to the minority of EU countries where children are less at risk of poverty than the total population. This is

true for 2010, but in 2000–2004 as well as in the peak year 2007 the poverty rate of children was higher than that of the overall population. Most alarming in the development of child poverty in Finland is that it tripled from 1995 to 2007 (from 4.7% to 13.9%) after a rather steady decrease since 1971. This development took place during years of economic growth. Since 2007 the child poverty rate has decreased slightly, being 12.4% in 2010 (13.3% among the population at large). (Salmi et al. 2012, analysis based on Income Distribution Statistics, Statistics Finland.)

Mary Daly also presents Finland as one of the countries "with relatively favourable child poverty outcomes". In comparison this is the case, but if we analyse the Finnish case more closely, we see some problems. One factor contributing to child poverty in Finland is the low labour market participation of parents in poor families due to diminished demand of labour force with low level of education, as globalisation of the economy has led to big structural changes in the industries. In 2009, 30% of the main providers in poor families with children were unemployed. On the other hand, 55% of them were employed, yet poor – in-work poverty is thus typical for families with children. But since the economic crisis in the 1990s, a high proportion of unemployment among the providers in poor families remained stable. This has to do with their level of education, which is low more often than in the average family with children; roughly one in three providers of poor families have no vocational education. On the other hand, 15% of the providers have graduated from college or university – so, there are no simple explanations to child poverty, and the explanations are in a complicated way interwoven with changes in the labour market. For example, providers in poor families more often than in the average families with children work part-time (which on average is less common in Finland than in the other EU countries) and have fixed-term employment contracts (which on average are more common among Finnish women than among women in other EU countries, and especially common among well-educated young women). (Salmi et al. 2012.)

The average unemployment rate of 15 to 64-year-olds during the present economic crisis has varied between 6.2% and 9% for men and 6.7% and 7.6% for women, being 7.5% for men and 7.3% for women in August 2012. At the same time, the employment rate of mothers and fathers with children under 18 has remained almost at the same high level as before autumn 2008. In August 2012, only 4.2% of fathers and 4.9% of mothers with children under 18 were unemployed. (Statistics Finland, Labour Force Statistics.) However, during autumn 2012, several companies both in manufacturing and other industries have announced of massive lay-offs; these lay-offs often concern male employees. Cuts in the state sector and in the municipalities may also lead to lay-offs of often female personnel.

Another factor contributing to child poverty is a considerable drop since the 1990s in the real value of income transfers to families with children. The income transfers were cut severely 1992-1995 and not raised until 2004. The recent raises of the income transfers do not cover the backwardness accumulated since 1992. Growth of income differences in Finland was the sharpest among OECD countries in 1995-2005, partly due to changes in tax policy. The share of GNP of public expenses directed to children and their families dropped from 4.1% to 2.9% 1995-2006, being 3.3% in 2010. During the years of economic growth, children and their families were not a priority. The main income transfers to families with children were index-linked as recently as 2009, but the present government froze the index rises for 2013–2015. (Salmi et al. 2012.)

In the discussion paper Mary Daly emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to the issue of child poverty and marginalisation. I warmly agree. In addition to poverty, in Finland the risks of marginalisation are connected with the shadows of the economic crisis of the 1990s. Since the 1990s, cuts and efforts to higher effectiveness in day care centres, schools and health care (for example big groups, big units, no substitutes, fewer regular controls in child health clinics and school health care, no daily presence of the school nurse) have deteriorated possibilities for teachers to get to know the children as individuals and create confidential relationships with them. The cuts have made it more difficult to reach a high quality of care and education on the daily basis, and to notice risks of marginalisation and help early on. At the same time, indicators of non-well-being among children and adolescents show an increase (for example, from the middle of the 1990s to 2010, the number of new clients in child welfare has tripled and the proportion of 13-17-year-olds in psychiatric hospitals has grown with 150%) and the need of special remedial services has grown, leading to growing expenses to the municipalities (Salmi et al. 2012; Paakkonen 2012.) During the past few years, in most municipalities multi-sectoral working groups have drawn up a statutory plan of children's well-being. In spite of this, with the financial crisis starting in 2008, the municipalities again plan to economise on day care and schools. This is a policy which not only is not cost-effective to the municipalities but works against the most effective approach to avoid risks of marginalisation, mentioned in Mary Daly's discussion paper, of offering effective policies and good growth environments for all children. This approach is also most effective in my mind, and has been characteristic to the Nordic welfare states. But this approach is gradually deteriorating with the trend towards downsizing the public sector since the 1990s.

The policy described above can be summed up in the concept of structural indifference (Kaufman 1990, Qvortrup 1994). Structural indifference has several dimensions in current policymaking, but I have condensed the definition into one sentence: the concept describes the clear contradiction which exists in societal policy between the knowledge of what children need to grow up well, based on findings of several branches of science and work by child professionals, and the everyday living conditions created by political decisions. Characteristic to structural indifference is that child poverty and well-being of children have been much debated in Finland during the 2000s, but this concern has not materialised in the political decisions on how to direct public resources. Structural indifference towards children's well-being deepens in present-day policymaking where economic policy, with an exclusive emphasis on constant competition and productivity, has gained the upper hand in all policy sectors. The market logic overrides the logic of care and education. (Salmi et al. 2012.)

In the host country paper Katrien De Boyser poses the important issue of the social inheritance of poverty. Recent Finnish research confirms findings made elsewhere. A cohort study of children born in 1987 – children who lived most of their childhood and youth in day care centres, schools and health services subject to cuts due to the economic depression – shows that if their childhood family has suffered of prolonged poverty, the children as adults have higher risk of low level of education, mental problems, being taken into custody, minor crimes and problems with income than the average young adult (Paananen et al. 2011). This study confirms that the education level of the parents, especially the mother, protects from the risks. We also know that roughly half of the families, whose children become clients of child welfare, are poor.

While I strongly agree that promoting the socio-cultural participation of children is a good philosophy to combat risks of marginalisation, I at the same time want to stress a strong need for the holistic approach. The development of policy measures as regards poverty of families with children on one hand, and services to ensure good growth environments to all children on the other hand, need to be as much in focus as the issue of socio-cultural participation. Another area in need of attention, which has not to do with child poverty but has to do with risks of marginalisation, is work–family balance and the role of working life in creating or hampering possibilities for good parenthood.

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