

THE WELL-BEING IN THE PERSPECTIVES OF PHOUM THMEY'S CHILDREN. THE ROLE OF AFFECTIVE CAPITAL

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Abstract

This paper is the result of a research carried out in Phoum Thmey, the most populated settlement of Sihanoukville, in the South of Cambodia.

The general aim of the research was to investigate the well-being dimensions of children involved in a sponsorship programme by using Amartya Sen's capability approach, a framework which embraces an integrated view of development in which not only material dimensions but also immaterial ones - such as human relations, freedom of choice and agency - matter.

The focus has been on the dimension of love and care (affective capital) and on its role in promoting children's capabilities.

Questo articolo è il risultato di una ricerca condotta a Phoum Thmey, il settlement più grande di Sihanoukville, una città della Cambogia meridionale.

La ricerca si proponeva di individuare le dimensioni del benessere dei minori coinvolti in un programma di sostegno a distanza utilizzando come cornice analitica il capability approach di Amartya Sen. Il capability approach abbraccia una visione integrata dello sviluppo, dando rilevanza non solo ai suoi aspetti materiali ma anche a quelli immateriali come le relazioni umane, la libertà di scelta e l'agency.

Lo studio si è concentrato sulla dimensione dell'amore e della cura (capitale affettivo) e sul suo ruolo nel promuovere le capabilities dei minori.

Keywords

Cambodia, children, capability approach, well-being, affective capital

Introduction

The level of children's well-being is crucial to understand the degree of development of a given society.

In the recent past, children's well-being depended exclusively on the households' income (Becker 1991). This reductionist idea was overcome over the last decade when children's well-being multidimensional indexes have been introduced by different international organizations.

Nevertheless, the mainstream approaches to children's well-being are still too narrow for two main

reasons. Firstly, because they do not involve children in the selection of the dimensions of their well-being and in the evaluation of the policies targeting them. Secondly, because they are not able to grasp some crucial aspects of children's well-being such as the affective capital.

In this paper, we will support the idea that the capability approach, introduced by the economist Amartya Sen in the 1980s, represents a way out of this impasse.

In the first paragraph, we will explain the main concepts and ideas within the capability approach. Having outlined the theoretical framework, we will move to the empirical level presenting the results of research carried out in an impoverished urban settlement in Cambodia.

In the second paragraph, we will give an overview of the research context focusing on the settlement's features, history and precariousness.

In the third paragraph, we will illustrate the research methods used, drawing upon a participatory strategy consistent with the main principles of the capability approach.

In the fourth paragraph, we will explore the main outcomes resulting from the study which are then discussed in more detail in the final paragraph. More precisely, in this section, particular attention will be given to the ways children are cared for by their caregivers.

Theoretical Framework: Capability Approach and Children

The conceptualisation and assessment of children's well-being deserve further investigations by development scholars and practitioners for several reasons.

First, two of Human Development Index dimensions – health and knowledge – and several Millennium Development Goals – above all the achievement of universal primary education and the reduction of child mortality – are directly related to the state of childhood. Second, the quality of life that human beings enjoy during adulthood is strongly shaped by the experiences that they lived as children.

Furthermore, despite the efforts of some international agencies to improve the state of children worldwide, they still remain the most affected by social and economic crises both in developed and developing countries (Comin et al. 2011).

Over the past decade, several international organisations have been advocating the necessity to embrace a new vision of children's well-being moving from the reductionist idea identifying it with the household's income or wealth to a multidimensional conceptualisation. Nevertheless, the mainstream indicators used to assess children's well-being are still too simplistic since they tend to be focused on material aspects of well-being, to conceptualise it in negative terms emphasizing children's shortages (Mayers 1992; Saith and Wazir 2010), and to identify the attributes of well-

being through top-down approaches (Mayers 1992; Saith and Wazir 2010; Biggeri 2006; Ballet et al. 2011).

On a policy level, especially in developing countries, such a perspective often leads to interventions based on a combination of paternalism and assistentialism that strengthen the sense of “victimisation” of children, dragging them into a vicious circle that reinforces their passivity and jeopardises their sense of resilience.

Thus, it is clear that a reorientation of research on children is needed for improving policies’ effectiveness. Such a reorientation, aimed at promoting good life, should take into account the participation of children and their families, and lead to policies that address real needs of people in the respect of local traditions and environments. The capability approach can contribute to this research and policy reorientation.

The capability approach has been introduced by the economist Amartya Sen in the 1980s as a critique of the traditional views of development drawing upon the utilitarian framework according to which the well-being of individuals corresponded to the maximisation of their personal advantage, where this advantage was basically reduced to the income and to the possession of commodities. On the contrary, within the capability approach, the accent is on people’s real freedoms (capabilities), to lead what represents a good life for them. In other words, this framework endorses a complex view of well-being emphasising the central role played by all those aspects - such as human relations and care, freedom of choice, participation and agency – overlooked within the mainstream (Sen 1985; 1999) aspects that crucially matter in children’s lives.

Children’s participation is a right in itself, promoted by the Convention on the Rights of Child – especially in article 12 – but also instrumental to the expansion of other capabilities and to the fulfilment of other rights (Biggeri and Karkara 2014).

Children’s participation embraces the idea that children are social actors, endowed with agency and capable of self-determination (at least at a minimum level) from birth. The level of agency and self-determination evolves through time according to the age of the child (Comin et al. 2011). This dynamic process is incorporated in the concept of “evolving capabilities” – similar to the notion of “evolving capacities” introduced by Lansdown (2005) – to capture the delicate balance between the right of the children to be recognised as active agents and their right to be protected and cared for as still immature human beings, contained in the article 5 of the Convention on the Rights of Child.

The affective capital is a key dimension of children’s well-being. As pointed out by UNICEF (2007), children who are neglected tend to suffer from concentration deficit disorders and, in the future, they will be more likely to develop an addiction to alcohol and drugs.

Ballet et al. (2004), in a study on street children in Mauritania, underline that the lack of affective capital is a major cause of children fleeing to the street whilst many scholars attribute this phenomenon to the material poverty. Thus we can assert that the well-being of children is strongly related to the well-being of their caregivers and that there is an intergenerational transmission of capabilities (Biggeri and Mehrotra 2011).

Research on children's well-being within the framework of capability approach should take into account this evolving process. In other words, well-being should be redefined at the same time as a status (well-being) and as a process (well-becoming), within a relational perspective able to connect present and future as well as all the variables influencing children's well-being and well-becoming, i.e. individual resources, personal choices, agency, goals and strategies alongside material, cultural and political structure of the environment where children live (Soecklin et al. 2014).

Context and research methods

In accordance with the theoretical framework, during the research, a primary importance was given to historical, economic and social aspects that influence children and their families' life.

One notable factor that arose on the surface among children and their relatives was the uncertainty that surrounded their daily life decisions. This feeling was directly connected with three aspects – the nature of the settlement, its history and its precariousness – that were investigated more in depth to have a better understanding of Phoum Thmey functioning and regulation, and its internal network.

Phoum Thmey

The research took place in Phoum Thmey (“The New Village” in Khmer), an impoverished urban settlement of 693 families located in the north-west part of Krong Preah Sihanouk Municipality – also known as Sihanoukville – of the homonymous Province in the South-West of Cambodia.

Positioned between the National Highway to Phnom Penh and the International Port, and crossed by the commercial railway, Phoum Thmey is formed by three different housing aggregations.

The first, where the school is sited, is the only one where families are legally allowed to live, as will be explained further.

The second area surrounds the International Port wall. Here, there is the central market of Phoum Thmey and an area known as ‘Chicken Farm’, with a number of so-called karaoke – bars with sex workers (Sandy 2009; Hoefinger 2011) – frequented by both locals and foreigners.

The third section is known to be the part where new migrants arrived more recently. It is the most

uncomfortable in terms of the environment, crossed by the railways from the school to the train deposit. Here, the dwellings have been built all along the track, next to unhealthy drains.

The two latter sections suffer from a particularly high density of residents and from far from optimal health conditions; moreover, sheet dwellings are considered to be too small in relation to the number of persons living inside.

The dwellings of Phoum Thmey vary substantially from one sub-section to another. From pile-dwellings of one floor with one room to those made of two floors and several rooms. The construction materials are even more diversified, from metal sheets and plastic cloths to wood and bricks. This reflects the heterogeneity of the inhabitants of the three sub-sections, boosted also by the increase in the settlement population after every migratory wave.

All the dwellings have water access (running water, ponds or shared wells). Transportation is uncomfortable and possible only by motorbike, by bicycle and on foot; for this reason, the inhabitants invented an expedient to move heavy things – a kind of hand-cart that moves on the railways, used by children when they help with the housework by transporting water from the well to home.

Khmer rouges' historical influence

In 1975, the Khmer Rouge regime organised the Kingdom of Cambodia in an extreme form of communism combined with widespread oppression that caused the death of the 25% of the population in four years (Heuveline 1998; Etcheson 2005), causing Cambodian totalitarianism to be enlisted among the worst tragedies of the last century.

Many researchers and academics over the last years (Sonis et al. 2009; Field et al. 2013) stated that half of the population have suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, mainly because of the sufferance they experienced – starvation, separation of the families, forced work and the still existing problem of unexploded mines disseminated under the Cambodian soil.

The Khmer Rouge regime, inspired by a radical ideology, prefigured a return to the Cambodian roots, thus displacing most of the urban citizens and reallocating them to rural areas, eventually reorganising the country's manufacturing and social structure (Laban Hinton 1998).

This program was totalitarian since it aimed at the complete elimination of all kind of powers apart from the “revolutionary organisation” of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (or the ‘Angkar’), of which Pol Pot was the secretary and best-remembered leader. Any form of higher education was considered to be the result of negative ‘western influences’, thus had to be eradicated. Religions were abolished and prohibited together with money transaction so banks had to close and finance

and the judiciary system ceased to exist. Most of the people active in any of these businesses were killed or managed to blend into the displaced by hiding their identities. Intragenerational relations and parental hierarchy were compromised and considered valueless– i.e, children had to call their closer relatives “comrade” (Szymusiak 1986).

People had to adhere to this wide plan of returning to the roots. Private property was abolished, while city dwellers had to leave their houses overnight to join social communes in the countryside, harvesting together and depending on the Khmer Rouge for the reorganization of the collective activities, thus including distribution of food, medical care, buildings construction, etc. (De Walque 2006; Kiernan 2014).

Despite the official instauration of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea in the whole country, the presence of the Khmer Rouges on the territory was uneven. Areas of the country with higher density, such as the central district and the outskirts of what used to be main cities – Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and the district of Battambang – were under strict control. However, in other areas, such as Sihanoukville, their presence was more scattered. This was also due to the ‘Mayaguez Incident’ which involved the U.S. army only a month after the establishment of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. In May 1975, an American container ship – Mayaguez – was captured, forcing the US army to attack Sihanoukville’s Port (Rowan 1975). Once the presence of the US Army became stable, the Khmer Rouge had less influence on the region. Thus, Sihanoukville became an aggregation point of many of the regime opponents and dissidents fleeing areas where the control of Khmer Rouges was stronger. In the mid-Seventies and Eighties, a number of them decided to settle upon an uninhabited hill close to the Port. That settlement, that coincided with the current legal area, was named Phoum Thmey and is the oldest part of the village.

Migration flows and the school

The origin of Phoum Thmey is strictly affected by the migration phenomenon. This settlement has been one of the most involved within the process of urbanisation because it represents a point of convergence between attractive job opportunities - due to its proximity to the International Port, its territory hosts various factories and tourism industries – and very affordable houses and land.

Investigating neighbourhood relations issues highlights interconnections between the three subsections and different migration flows.

The subsection over the railways includes the school and the day care centre Via Del Campo. This is the only ‘legal’ area of all the settlement, where the government gave official consensus to settle. During the Nineties, the first community of workers set up homes because of the enlargement of the

International Port, joining the original households upon the hill and closer to the Port. By that time, the settlement had severe problems of isolation from the basic services Sihanoukville provided to its inhabitants, included instruction services. Therefore, children's parents living in Phoum Thmey decided to build a small school, where lessons were conducted in turn by the adult members of the families. After some years, thanks to an anonymous Japanese donation, the school was expanded and became an official instruction structure.

In 2010, after additional help obtained from the organisations Cifa Onlus and Ecpat, it was possible to add a new building. In spite of the following changes, for the inhabitants of this part of the settlement, the original building remained a focal point for holding parties during festivities such as the Khmer New Year.

In the meanwhile, the flow of workers has risen and an increasing number of households started to settle down simultaneously in the second and third area, inhabiting firstly the main street connecting the school to the International Port and secondly the free lands along the railways. A part of those households – even the ones in more precarious conditions – grew during the time becoming more stable and planning their stay as long as they could be employed. On the contrary, a number of workers living there are “in transit”, therefore they are not looking for a regularisation of their situation. However, the families that took part in the research were all characterised by long-term plans in Phoum Thmey.

Land Governance

The land topic in Cambodia is at the roots of many recent conflicts. The rights over tenure went through a number of changes and conflicting land management regimes in different times of history. In the attempt to regularise their stay, Phoum Thmey families followed different patterns of behaviour and strategies to claim ownership of their houses and lands – this included taking out significant loans that they will never be able to pay back (Dell'Asin 2011). However, the unclear and conflicting information they possess often risk to jeopardise their plans.

To understand dwellers' strategies, it is important to diachronically summarise the different policies about land in Cambodia (Kusakabe et al. 1995; Sekiguchi and Hatsukano 2013).

In the ancient customary law, all land in Cambodia was a property of the King. However, the people used to express their rights of use of the land by cultivating it freely. During the French colonial period the private ownership system was instituted. Between 1920, when the colonial kind of property was established, and 1975, the beginning of the Khmer Rouges regime, both systems functioned in parallel. In the years of Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979, the private property of land was

abolished, and all records related to land ownership were destroyed. When the Khmer regime was established, a new form of socialist economy was introduced: the land became a property of the State, and the people had no property rights over it. The whole agricultural system of the country was reorganised: the cities were emptied and everyone was forced to work in agricultural collectives in rural areas. Here, the only right to the land was the right (or the obligation) to use it collectively for the purposes of the regime. Every title deed owned before 1975 was torn up. In 1979, after the invasion by the Vietnamese troops and the end of the regime, the People's Republic of Kampuchea was established, lasting through the 1980s. The land tenure system was readapted to the Vietnamese patterns: farmers were divided into groups to share the land, labour and animals. In 1989, a new land reform recognised the ownership of residential land and the right of ownership on cultivated land. Nonetheless, this new reform did not work because of the historic coexistence of the ancient customary law and the new governmental law. At the beginning of the 1990s, rapid economic growth increased the rural land value that became a target for investors. Recently, a new Cambodian National Strategic Development Plan has been launched, focusing on the industrialisation in rural areas in order to accelerate economic growth and to reduce poverty. To achieve this goal, the government promoted the Economic Land Concessions. The legal ownership of land has now become fundamental for those holding land under customary law and fearing to lose it.

Nowadays confusion and misunderstandings about the legal tenure of land are common in numerous disputes, and they were (and are) often followed by forced eviction in form of threats, intimidation, violence or the removal of people from the premises (Mgbako et al. 2010; Brickell 2014). The essential preconditions for granting Economic Land Concessions are often not respected, and the corruption phenomenon (Chandler 2009) limits clear understanding of the legal status of tenure in different areas.

The illegal part of Phoum Thmey is very affected by this complex situation of the land property, and various strategies are in place to contrast the fear of displacements. About five years ago the director of the Phoum Thmey settlement organised a meeting to tell dwellers that the works to lift and upgrade the railways and the International Port had started, thus they had to leave. After this warning, around three years ago – when the displacement of Vietnamese dwellings close to the Port took place –, there was a concrete chance to secure the tenure for the residents: a group of Phoum Thmey dwellers went to the Department of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction of Sihanoukville paying 30 dollars for a formal document in which, apparently, the ownership of the land of their houses was officially recognised. They were told to return to their houses and wait for

a verification that they were the owners, and after that, the document would have become legal and effective. No governor office went to check the situation and the document never got legal value. Since then, these dwellers keep a copy of the document attached to their doors in case of eviction, to prove that they actually went to the Office but that nobody came after. Some people gave money to other Phoum Thmey inhabitants for their residential land, to become the owners; however, they are not, and they are either unaware of that, or they discovered after paying. At the time, some families were not worried as they thought that since they have been living there, the land would now belong to them.

Research methods

The data were collected over a period of six months through qualitative research methods, either verbal or visual following the framework of the capability approach.

First, the review of the available archive material alongside informal interviews with some key informants, such as staff members of the day care centre and teachers of the school of Phoum Thmey, was helpful in acquiring a deeper understanding of the research context and to design the research itself according to ethical principles. In particular, we discussed with the director of the day care centre the research aims, topics and methods to prevent raising unrealistic expectations.

Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with older children (aged 11-17) involved in the sponsorship program and with women representing their main caregivers (mothers, grandmothers, aunts and older sisters). In total, 14 older children and 50 women have been interviewed.

In order to create a comfortable research setting, the interviews took place in an environment which was familiar to participants, namely the day care centre for children and the houses for women.

The interviews were conducted in the native language of participants (Khmer) with the help of a translator.

At the beginning of each interview, the research aims, topics and methods were repeated in order to get the participants' informed consent to proceed with the queries.

The aim of the interviews was to investigate either the daily life of the participants or the well-being attributes that they value, trying to understand if the direct and indirect beneficiaries of the programme are living a life that they consider worth living.

The themes of the queries were basically focused on the family; school and daycare centre (for children) / work (for women); free-time and community. Through the last query, both children and women were asked to reflect on the opportunities that respectively children and women should have in their existence letting them identify the well-being attributes that matter to them (Biggeri et al.

2006).

For children, the same information was also collected through the method of thematic drawings allowing us to involve in the study even younger children (aged 6-10) and to investigate some aspects which did not come to light during interviews. Younger children were asked to draw on “what it means to them having a good life” and on “activities carried out on a daily basis”. The drawings were followed by individual discussions in order to avoid misunderstandings (Stokrocki 2000). In total, 80 drawings were realised (40 on the theme of good life and 40 on one of the daily activities).

Findings

Children (either through interviews or drawings) reported that the most important well-being dimensions to them are Shelter and Environment (59%); Love and Care (41%); Education (30%); Leisure and Recreational Activities (18%); Health (17%); Economic Security (15%) and Respect (2%).

The dimensions identified by children are close to the ones identified by women: Love and care (58%); Economic Security (46%); Shelter and Environment (37%); Education (34%); Health (34%); Social Relations (6%) and Respect (2%).

Shelter, Environment, Love, and Care were the most reported dimensions either by children or by women. These dimensions are strictly interconnected. In fact, either for children or for women the shelter does not represent exclusively a physical space (even if this connotation is important as well due to the fact that most respondents live in constant fear of eviction since the shacks hosting them are built on illegal land) but it has to be considered more generally as the space of private affections (the home) and for children of the social relations (the day care centre) as well.

Children did not mention the social relations among the dimensions of their well-being as women did. Nevertheless, some details of the drawings such the open door/gate of the day care centre and the self-representation in the recreational activities consisting mainly of group activities, reveal that this dimension plays a key role in their lives.

For women, social relations are characterised by proximity relationships. In other words, women in the community keep good relations with their neighbours (90% of the cases), but they have almost no contact with other people in the community. Neighbours help each other (74%) in looking after children, by collecting money or food in case of necessity, in looking after the house, in setting up ceremonies and parties during weddings, funerals or other occasions and to spend national holidays

together (56%).

Both for children or women the home is especially connected to the sphere of rest and leisure activities (sleeping, watching TV etc.) and to the convivial moments with their kin (consuming meals, talking together etc.). For children, the day care centre is connected to the dimension of recreational activities whilst the school is associated with education. All children interviewed declared that education is important to them for its instrumental role to act as a springboard for entering the job market and reaching the economic security. This latter dimension, in the words of children, appears to be more relevant for their future than for their present.

On the contrary, for women, the Economic Security represents an actual need. They recognise the importance of savings (78%) especially for facing health problems, building better houses, buying food and investing in children's education and care.

Nevertheless, very few families are able to save money (23%) due to a combination of low salaries, debt and unavailability of appropriate savings services.

Children have a positive view of health as the opportunities to be well nourished in order to grow up healthy (again children refer to their future) and to live in a salubrious and clean environment whilst women consider health in negative terms, i.e. as the absence of illness. This difference is probably due to the age gap.

The majority of children and women in the sample seems not to face food shortage. The diet is varied – consisting mainly of rice, vegetables, fish and pork – and all people are able to have at least two meals (women) /three meals (children) per day.

The insalubrious environment, instead, is a major problem in Phoum Thmey and the most common diseases are typhus fever, diarrhoea and several types of infections, due to the unhealthy environment conditions. HIV/AIDS is also widespread.

Some women in the sample (48%) declared they rely upon both traditional (massages/krukmer) and conventional (medicines/hospital) medical cares and understand which to apply to different circumstances. The remaining women reported relying just on conventional medicine.

Discussion

Households

Most families involved in the project come from the provinces near Sihanoukville. The migratory flow started with a first migration, followed by a second migration mostly composed of siblings, grandnephews and cousins informed of job opportunities. The flow followed the uxorial

inclination of the Cambodian families (Demont and Heuveline 2008) which traditionally move towards places where bride's parents initially settled. The reasons for relocation are various but most families moved to Sihanoukville looking for a new job or to join their extended families.

The archive analysis carried out at the day care centre in January 2014 showed that there were 73 families involved in the sponsorship program. Five households were mono-parental, but almost everyone had almost a member of the extended family living there to support them (always women). Indeed, the presence of extended family members is quite common in the traditional Cambodian household. In the case of three children without parents, some members of the extended family took care of them for what concerned body care, alimentation, formal and informal education, socialisation, embedding the parental role. However, in various cases, one or both parents had to stay long periods of time away from their children for job duties (i.e., when there were temporary job opportunities in other provinces or Countries). When it happened, children continued to live in Phoum Thmey with the mother and/or the enlarged family. This choice was taken for two main reasons: firstly, the temporary job often was all-encompassing and far from the members of the family, so there was no-one to take care of the children. Secondly, families took into deep consideration the engagement with scholastic and sponsorship programmes, so it was considered essential not to suspend them (Ayres 2000; Lavasani 2013). However, children travelled with their family when they moved for main festivities or summer scholar interruption – during which those who came from rural areas returned to the family fields to help in farming activities.

Housework duties are often split between family's members in relation to their age and availability; however, the meal preparation is usually a female prerogative. Child care, including body care and the free time to spend together, is thought as an equal duty of mother and father. However, the mother is often more present than the father at home and so she takes the main responsibility for the children. Concerning housework, it starts to be shared with children when they are seven or eight years old as a practice of socialisation and chores learning.

Regarding family planning and investment, families are aware of contraceptive methods. Even though only a small use of birth-control pill or condoms is registered, there is wide use of natural birth control (Samandari et al. 2010). The fact that birth control is a common practice is confirmed by the family planning that a huge part of the families is following. This decision is mainly driven by the awareness that waiting for a better occupation, dwelling and/or economic condition could guarantee more stability and assurance to raise new babies. Moreover, a relevant weight is given to the possibility to have children of both genders in virtue of their different social role in the future care of parents. The daughter is traditionally addressed to the parent's care – because, as mentioned

above, the Cambodian family is more uxorilocal than neolocal – while the son takes on an economic kind of support, although the educative and working investment is the same for both genders.

Neighbourhood and social network

The internal structure of Phoum Thmey community is ramified. The community has an elected delegate at the district level. The area under his / her administration consists of three sub-sections in which we find three representatives – one for each section – directly elected from Phoum Thmey residents. Every sub-section is divided into another entity, the kroum, a household group consisting of a relatively small number of families. Every kroum has a local representative elected from its own area. The kroum and the sub-sections representatives refer directly to the Phoum Thmey delegate at the district level for any problem affecting the whole community, and they are also responsible for providing information about meetings and gatherings in Phoum Thmey.

Since there are strong social ties within the neighbourhoods, most of the interviewed families expressed the wish to remain in the settlement even though some of them could move to the city. These relations are evident especially when somebody is taking care of a neighbour's house when empty, in the case of shared monitoring over each other's children or when the food is shared for the benefit of all. In special cases, a common fund is created in order to solve urgent situations – i.e., an expensive caesarian section in the hospital.

Keeping children safe is considered important for the entire community. This task, which includes several activities such as supervising children while playing, helping them to take care of their hygiene and feeding them, is not a parent's exclusive responsibility but involves many adults of the community.

This cooperation in the kroum allows mothers to carry out their home or work activities even during the day since they know their children are well looked after. When the neighbours are busy and they cannot take care of the children, a relative comes to stand in for the parents.

When they are not at the day care centre, children spend most of their time in the school's yard nearby their houses, often playing with neighbours' children, always monitored by adults, with few exceptions. For this reason, within the projects, there are no proper “street children” as such.

Episodes of domestic violence, that take place in a small part of the households, do not physically involve children – except in rare occasions. However, the significant alcohol consumption – particularly by men – results in quarrels between parents that neighbours stop by intervening (UNESCO 2002; Yount and Carrera 2006). In a number of cases, mothers manage to avoid fights

by preventing the husband from coming home.

Children care

In most cases, children receive equal attention from both male and female parents and relatives. As already mentioned, it is considered a plus to have children of both sexes and, for education, an equal investment in both sons and daughters has been recorded.

Many of the children spend a consistent part of their free time outside the house because of the hot weather and the dwellings' small size. At the same time, their playing grounds are close to the houses. Physical punishments are not socially acceptable and until the age of four the children are usually subject to a great amount of affectionate contact and are free in their conduct. As they grow older, it is considered essential for the children to be able to control emotional expressions and great importance is given to their self-control ability. Even the space dedicated to the physical contact decreases as they grow up and it is delimited to some games where physical interaction, on the contrary, is predominant – like “fight games”.

The Centre

Concerning the relationship between the school and the day care centre – the day of the children is split between the two places –, there are few connections, mainly because the day care centre personnel plays a role of mediation, informing families or the director in case of family or education related problems. Families are not directly involved in the day care centre activities; however, a social worker periodically visits the houses to talk about children conditions.

The children of the day care centre were selected among those attending the school, specifically taking into account the stability their families could provide them – those with higher probabilities of remaining with their families in the settlement for a long time.

Families take a great responsibility in helping children with their homework (even if sometimes it is difficult due to the high level of illiteracy) but they are not involved in the learning process (neither in the school nor day care centre activities). Moreover, families perceive such places as pivotal in the development of children capacities. According to their point of view, educated children could gain access to better jobs and consequently have positive spill-over effects on family daily life strategies once adults.

Children's socio-economic well-being varies in the group, from high poverty situations to relative wealth, thus guaranteeing heterogeneity within the day care centre. New relations are so promoted between children coming from different environments, generating new bonds and strengthening the network between distant socio-economic dwellers of Phoum Thmey. Still, the network ties among

children's families appear to be loose. The reason could be the lack of joint activities in the centre, the scarce women mobility during their free time and the low propensity to face problems that involve different areas and/or kroum jointly.

Conclusions

The capability approach, valuing people's participation and agency as pillars of development, is a valid framework to explore childhood related issues.

The process of involving children in the selection of the relevant dimensions of their well-being and in the evaluation of the quality of their lives allows scholars and policymakers to focus on the real needs of the children and make the latter more aware of strengths and weaknesses of their life. Moreover, the role that immaterial aspects of development play within the capability approach, allows an in-depth investigation of that dimensions of well-being related to the affective capital which is crucial for children's well-being and well-becoming.

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