

Children's wellbeing remains a blind-spot in public policies in France



The Lancet Campaign on Child and Adolescent Health, with the purpose to put children at the heart of the vision for a sustainable humanity, offers an opportunity to reflect on child health in France. Unfortunately, children's health and wellbeing is still being neglected in French public policies. Behind the intentions, the problem seems to be a focus on the wrong factors that affect children's wellbeing.

First, the focus on individual behaviours for public health policies is an issue. Childhood experiences strongly affect quality of life in future adulthood. WHO, the UN, and UNICEF are mobilising for a better understanding of the determinants of child health and advocating their wider integration into public policy. Indeed, these determinants have a major role in health and wellbeing, whether direct or indirect, as shown in the conceptual framework Early Childhood Development Instrument.¹ Public health policies should be focused on these determinants;² but this is too often not the case. In France, in particular, public health policies are designed with an individual focus, although such strategies have been shown to be both inefficient and unequal, reflecting a fragmented vision.³ Children's policies are no exception. For example, in the First 1000 Days strategy, the question of social determinants was not addressed,⁴ and the measures proposed focused on the health system and on informing parents.

Another issue is the absence of focus on health impact assessment for non-health measures. Because of the effect of social determinants, decisions in many sectors can be detrimental. These decisions might concern many areas as diverse as the organisation of parents' work, urban planning, access to green spaces, access to culture, education processes, and regulation of advertising. One recent example is the effect of measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. The effect of these measures on children's wellbeing and mental health has been documented.⁵ Other examples where health impact assessment for non-health measures would be needed include reforms in the education system, quality standards of early childhood facilities, commitment to parental leave,⁶ and reform in the child protection system. Such reforms and decisions should be subjected

to health impact assessments to assess and correct their potential harmful effect. But health impact assessments are poorly implemented and face some difficulties, both in terms of the work and time they require and the absence of ownership of the issues by decision makers.⁷

Another important issue to consider is the paucity of commitment to children's health. Children are not currently a priority. For example, there is no clear and committed health policy on alcohol in the area of pregnancy support, even though in France approximately 8000 children a year are born with fetal alcohol syndrome. Moreover, infant mortality in France has been increasing over the past 10 years,⁸ without any organisational investigations or measures taken to curb the phenomenon.

Independent reports (from the Defender of Rights or the *Cour des Comptes*)⁹ have highlighted the decline in children's rights, the potentially devastating effect of some policies, the decay of specialised children's health-care services, and the inequalities to which children are subjected. From one report to the next, from one area of intervention to another, the situation is stagnating or getting worse. Is the problem due to an issue with knowledge transfer about the health impact of non-health measures? An obsolete public health system not adapted to the issue of societal wellbeing? Or decision makers' disinterest? Researchers, field professionals, and decision makers, we are all responsible for this situation. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees an inherent right to life, survival, and development (Article 6), and to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24).

France should seize the opportunity of a new parliament to re-examine its public health policy by understanding that a society is judged by the way it treats its children.

I declare no competing interests.

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For more on **The Lancet Campaign on Child and Adolescent Health** see <https://www.thelancet.com/campaigns/child-adolescent-health>

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