



THE ALLIANCE
FOR CHILD PROTECTION
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Summary of the Desk Review of Child Wellbeing in Humanitarian Action: Definition, Concepts and Domains

Introduction and background



Ensuring children's wellbeing is the ultimate goal of child protection in humanitarian action. However, interpretations of child wellbeing vary across cultures, contexts, and organizations. This variability extends to the key factors, or domains, that contribute to child wellbeing, including:

- The individual child's personal characteristics and life experiences,
- The family's experiences and history,
- The type of humanitarian situation, and
- The coping capacity of the child, family, and community.

The lack of an accepted definition of “child wellbeing” and its related factors limits actors’ efforts to set shared objectives and build an evidence base across programmes, contexts, and agencies. A common framework for defining and measuring child wellbeing in humanitarian action can support common child protection outcomes across humanitarian interventions while adapting to children’s unique differences.



This is a summary of:
The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019).
Desk Review on Child Wellbeing in Humanitarian Action:
Concepts, Definitions, and Domains.

Methodology



The desk review (a) synthesized existing definitions of child wellbeing from the academic, international development, and humanitarian fields and (b) identified key domains of child wellbeing that should be considered in humanitarian settings. Thirty-four documents, including meta-analyses covering more than 50 measures and frameworks, were reviewed in three categories:



1. *Overview*: largely academic studies examining the concept of child wellbeing and its definition, measurement, relevant domains, and potential indicators.
2. *Human and child rights and protection*: academic studies, sectoral documents and “grey literature” examining child wellbeing through a rights- and protection-based lens.
3. *Humanitarian child wellbeing*: academic studies, policy guidelines, and documents from humanitarian agencies describing child wellbeing, its domains, and indicators.

Findings



Part one: Existing definitions and conceptual influences

Many child wellbeing definitions incorporate key concepts such as child development, child rights, children's own perceptions (or subjective wellbeing), present conditions, and future outcomes. Most definitions describe wellbeing as *quality of life*. Certain key influences emerged across the definitions:

- **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model.** This model views child wellbeing as multi-faceted, affected by inter-related factors at the individual, family, community, and societal levels.

- **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).** The CRC emphasizes a child's right to be heard, key familial relationships, protection and safety, and social and cultural rights.
- **Subjective *and* objective measures of wellbeing.** Subjective measures (the child's perspective) can provide context and explain objective statistics and trends, such as child mortality rates.
- **Cultural and normative frameworks.** Wellbeing discussions often consider the society's views on childhood in general, child rearing, gender roles, children's social problems and needs, etc.
- **Positive frameworks.** Wellbeing measurements are including positive indicators – lifeskills, resilience, play and leisure, civic engagement – that focus on children's strengths and resilience.



Part two: Domains of child wellbeing

Most frameworks fall into two schools: those which examine child wellbeing from a child-centered, holistic perspective and those which focus on “achieving outcomes” through statistical measures of child wellbeing. Across these two approaches, there are three common domains of child wellbeing:

- Mental health (behavioral and emotional functioning),
- Relationships, and
- Physical health.

These domains are distinct but interrelated. In fact, there are indications that relationships play a primary role in wellbeing: children themselves have highlighted *family or caregiver relationships* as the most important factor in their wellbeing. Children do not exist in a vacuum, so contextual frameworks also explored the effects of macro-level systems, policies, beliefs, and trends on wellbeing.

Humanitarian-specific examinations of children's wellbeing generally align with the overall research, but they include additional domains (such as age and developmental stage) and a greater focus on context. This helps capture the differential impact of humanitarian emergencies on subsets of girls and boys.

Recommendations

- Humanitarian actors should adopt the following definition of child wellbeing:

Child wellbeing is a dynamic, subjective and objective state of physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and social health in which children:

- are safe from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence;
- meet their basic needs, including survival and development;
- are connected to and cared for by primary caregivers;
- have the opportunity for supportive relationships with relatives, peers, teachers, community members and society at large; and
- have the opportunity and elements required to exercise their agency based on their emerging capacities.

- The individual, family, community, and contextual levels that influence child wellbeing should be further divided into specific domains, including age and gender.
- All data should be disaggregated by gender, age, and disability to learn how each domain affects children differently based on their age, developmental stage, and gender.
- Objective, subjective, and positive indicators (where possible) should be selected for each domain to ensure that children's own perspectives are included throughout the analysis.
- Measurement frameworks should include a process for contextualization and prioritization that includes the meaningful participation of children, families, and communities.
- A core set of domains and indicators should be kept across all contexts to allow for comparison.