

ASSESSING AND ENHANCING CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING IN MOLDOVA: A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK ALIGNED WITH EU STANDARDS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36004/nier.cecg.II.2024.18.27>

***Abstract.** Assessing children's well-being is a multifaceted process involving evaluation of various dimensions of child's life, including health, education, social relationships, and economic resources. The paper explores key methodological approaches to assessing children's well-being, with a focus on harmonizing Moldova's indicators with European Union (EU) standards. The study reviews 8 approaches, including multidimensional indicators, child rights-based measures, quality of life assessments, economic resources evaluations, health and development metrics, and the participatory approach. In addition, it outlines the necessary steps for aligning Moldova's child-related statistics with EU frameworks, such as the European Statistical System (ESS) and the Child Well-being Index (CWI). The paper concludes with analysis of Moldova's recent trends, highlighting increase in children with disabilities and changes in vaccination rates, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive policies and specialized services. By adopting harmonized methodologies and implementing targeted interventions, Moldova can significantly improve the well-being of child population and align with EU standards. The paper was developed within the framework of Subprogram 030101 „Strengthening the resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability of the economy of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the accession process to the European Union”, institutional funding.*

Keywords: *child well-being, health indicators, education, Republic of Moldova, EU standards, morbidity, vaccination, socioeconomic factors, child protection*

JEL: *I15, I24, I30, J13*

UDC: *364.658-053.2*

Introduction. Children's well-being is a crucial indicator of a society's overall health and development, encompassing a broad spectrum of factors that influence the quality of life for younger generations. As Moldova seeks to align its child well-being indicators with European Union (EU) standards, it becomes increasingly important to adopt comprehensive and harmonized methodologies for measuring these indicators. Understanding children's well-being involves examining not only the material conditions of their lives, such as economic resources and access to education, but also their social relationships, emotional health, and opportunities for development. This paper explores various methodological approaches to assessing children's well-being, particularly in the context of Moldova's efforts to harmonize with EU standards. By reviewing multidimensional indicators, child rights-based measures, and quality of life approaches, the study aims to provide a robust framework for evaluating children's well-being in Moldova. The paper also discusses the steps for Moldova to adopt EU statistical frameworks and improve children's living conditions, including the vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities and those facing economic hardships. Through a concerted effort by government, NGOs, and communities, Moldova can create a healthier, more supportive environment for its children, ensuring their development aligns with EU standards and best practices.

Literature review. Assessing children's well-being is a complex process that involves multiple dimensions of a child's life. This literature review summarizes five key sources that contribute to the methodological understanding of children's well-being. Bethell et al. (2017) focus on assessing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and how these experiences impact both child and family well-being. The study highlights the importance of evaluating children's risk factors for trauma and stress through population-based and clinical research. It emphasizes cumulative risk scoring as a valid approach for identifying children at risk and promoting resilience in families (Bethell et al., 2017). Forrest et al. (2012) introduce the Patient-Reported Outcome Measurement Information System (PROMIS®) for children and youth, a tool designed to measure health outcomes from the child's perspective. Their study emphasizes the growing need for patient-reported outcomes (PROs) in pediatric psychology, and how these can offer new insights into children's physical and psychological health (Forrest et al., 2012). Bevans et al. (2010) expand on child-reported outcomes, focusing on the development of reliable instruments that assess health, illness, and well-being in children aged 8–17. Their work stresses the importance of developmentally sensitive methods to capture accurate self-reports from children, acknowledging the challenges posed by children's cognitive development (Bevans et al., 2010). Brockevelt et al. (2018) present a qualitative study that examines children's subjective well-being within an

ecological and relationship-based model. Their findings emphasize the significance of meaningful social connections and engagement in activities for children's well-being, advocating for a broader perspective that includes social and emotional domains (Brockvelt et al., 2018). Lastly, Axford et al. (2005) focus on the evaluation of children's services and interventions, introducing a method based on research evidence and logic modeling. Their work highlights need for experimental and non-experimental methods to assess the effectiveness of child interventions, underscoring the importance of tailoring services based on individual child needs (Axford et al., 2005). The reviewed studies demonstrate a broad range of methodological approaches to assessing children's well-being, from evaluating adverse childhood experiences to integrating subjective well-being within ecological models. These studies underscore the importance of objective and subjective measures and the need for developmentally appropriate tools that account for children's diverse life experiences.

Methodological approaches to assessing children's well-being. From the perspective of harmonizing the key indicators of children's living standards in Moldova with EU standards, there are several methodological approaches to assessing children's well-being (*Figure 1*).



Figure 1. **Methodological approaches to assessing children's well-being**
Source: Elaborated by the author

1) *The multidimensional indicators approach* recognizes that children's well-being cannot be measured by a single indicator or dimension. Instead, multiple aspects of a child's life are considered, such as health, education, housing, household income, safety, social and emotional relationships, and access to cultural and recreational resources. The Child Material and Social Deprivation Index (C-MSDI) is an indicator used by Eurostat that reflects this approach, measuring children's material and social deprivation by assessing their access to essential

goods and social activities important for their development. It is applied through data collection from national or regional surveys, which are then compared to identify differences and assess progress or regress in various dimensions of well-being.

2) *The child rights-based approach* relies on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and focuses on assessing the respect for children's fundamental rights, such as the right to education, health, protection against violence and exploitation, and the right to participate in decisions affecting them. The Child Rights Index is an example of an index representing this approach, evaluating how countries respect and implement children's rights. This index may include sub-indices for education, health, social protection, and participation rights. It is implemented by monitoring children's rights using governmental data and NGO reports, combined with periodic evaluations of legislation and programs dedicated to children.

3) *The quality-of-life approach* focuses on measuring children's overall satisfaction with their lives, considering both objective factors (income, health, education) and subjective factors (life satisfaction, happiness, social relationships). A relevant indicator in this regard is the Child Well-Being Index (CWI), developed by UNICEF, which measures children's overall well-being based on a set of indicators reflecting their quality of life. The data used are taken from opinion surveys among children and parents, combined with statistical data on health, education, and living conditions.

4) *The economic resources approach* focuses on assessing the economic resources available to children and their families. This approach measures children's well-being through household income, access to essential goods and services, and the level of social protection. The Child Poverty Index reflects this approach by measuring the proportion of children living below the poverty line, thus assessing their access to sufficient economic resources. It is applied through the analysis of economic data and household income, evaluating the impact of poverty on children's well-being and identifying vulnerable groups.

5) *The health and development approach* assesses children's well-being by measuring physical and mental health, as well as cognitive and emotional development. A relevant indicator for this approach is the Child Health and Development Index, which includes indicators such as infant mortality, nutrition, access to medical care, psychomotor development, and mental health status. Calculating this indicator requires the collection of health data through national health systems, surveys, and clinical assessments, as well as the evaluation of development through standardized tests and observations in schools and care centers.

6) *The education and human capital approach* focuses on measuring access to education and its quality, as well as long-term educational outcomes, including the skills and abilities acquired by children. The Child Education Index evaluates school enrollment rates, academic performance, graduation rates, and access to educational resources. It is calculated based on data obtained from the analysis of

educational statistics, the evaluation of standardized tests, and the monitoring of educational progress over the years of study.

7) *The multiple deprivation approach* identifies children who face multiple forms of deprivation, such as lack of access to education, health, adequate housing, and food security. The Child Multidimensional Deprivation Index (CMDI) measures children's deprivation across multiple dimensions to identify those children facing the most severe deprivations. Survey and administrative data are used to construct multidimensional deprivation profiles and determine the incidence and severity of deprivation among children.

8) *The participatory approach* directly involves children in the process of assessing their well-being, to better reflect their personal perspectives and experiences. This can include participatory methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and direct consultations with children. An example of this is the Children's Voices Initiative, a participatory evaluation project where children are directly asked about their well-being and the challenges they face in their daily lives. This approach is implemented by organizing consultation sessions with children, facilitating discussions in schools and communities, and integrating their feedback into evaluation reports and educational policies.

There are several steps to allow the harmonization of child-related statistics with EU standards (**Figure 2**):

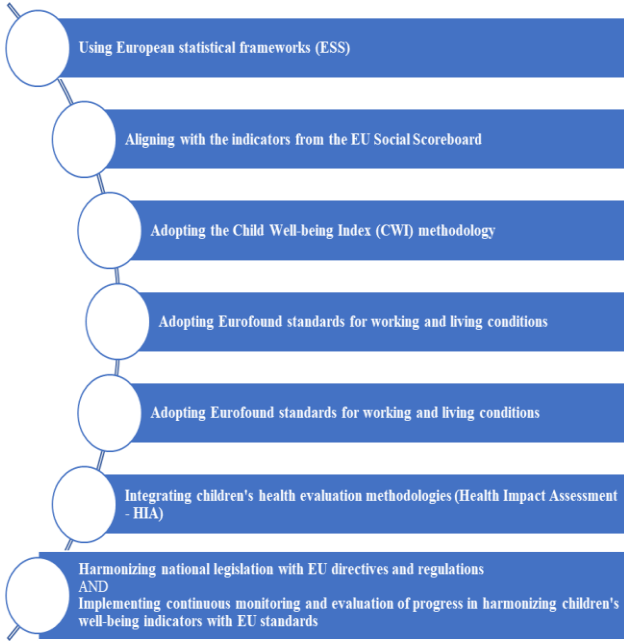


Figure 2. Steps to allow the harmonization of child-related statistics with EU standards

Source: Elaborated by the author

a) *Using European statistical frameworks (ESS)*. The European Statistical System (ESS) is a partnership between Eurostat and national statistical institutes of the EU member states. ESS provides the framework and methodology for

collecting harmonized statistical data at the European level, allowing the comparison of indicators between member states. Moldova must adopt the ESS methodology for data collection and reporting, which involves aligning the definitions and categories used in data collection with those used by the ESS. Statistical specialists need to be trained in the use of ESS tools and methodologies to ensure proper data collection and interpretation. It is necessary to integrate specific ESS surveys, such as EU-SILC, which collects detailed data on living conditions, including income, poverty, and social exclusion, providing a solid basis for analyzing children's well-being compared to EU standards.

b) *Aligning with the indicators from the EU Social Scoreboard.* The EU Social Scoreboard monitors member states' performance in terms of social justice, including specific indicators for children's well-being, such as poverty, access to education, and health. Moldova needs to evaluate its existing indicators of children's well-being and identify discrepancies with the Social Scoreboard standards. It is necessary to develop an action plan to align national indicators with those in the EU Social Scoreboard, including legislative changes and specific policies, and to implement a continuous monitoring system to track progress in achieving the set objectives and adjust strategies based on developments.

c) *Adopting the Child Well-being Index (CWI) methodology.* The Child Well-being Index (CWI) is a tool for measuring children's well-being, assessing multiple dimensions such as health, education, housing, and social relationships. The CWI allows a comprehensive assessment of children's well-being and its comparison at the international level. It is necessary to establish specific dimensions of children's well-being to be measured in accordance with the CWI methodology and to implement a robust data collection system for each CWI dimension, ensuring that the data is relevant and comparable at the European level.

d) *Adopting Eurofound standards for working and living conditions.* Eurofound is an EU agency that provides research and information on working and living conditions in Europe. Eurofound standards are used to assess the quality of life, including the working conditions of parents and their impact on children. It is necessary to evaluate the existing Eurofound standards and identify those relevant to assessing children's well-being in Moldova, integrating them into national policies by adapting national policies to meet these standards, including regulations on work-life balance for parents, and implementing these standards and monitoring their effects on children's well-being, with necessary adjustments along the way.

e) *Integrating children's health evaluation methodologies (Health Impact Assessment - HIA).* Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a methodology used to evaluate the potential impact of policies, programs, and projects on the health of the population, including children. Integrating HIA methodologies can ensure that health and education policies in Moldova are aligned with EU standards. It is necessary to train evaluation teams by preparing expert teams to use the HIA methodology to assess the impact of policies on children's health and to apply HIA in the policy-making process, ensuring that all legislative initiatives and projects are evaluated from the perspective of their impact on children's health.

f) *Harmonizing national legislation with EU directives and regulations* is essential to ensure the compatibility of child protection, education, and health policies with European standards. It is necessary to identify differences between national legislation and EU directives in the field of child protection and education and to develop and adopt the necessary changes in national legislation to align it with EU requirements and standards, and to monitor the implementation of new regulations and evaluate their impact on children's well-being.

g) *Implementing continuous monitoring and evaluation of progress in harmonizing children's well-being indicators with EU standards* is essential to ensure an efficient and sustainable process. This requires the development of a national monitoring framework that includes key performance indicators for children's well-being, the establishment of a system for periodic data collection and analysis to evaluate progress in harmonizing indicators, the publication of monitoring reports, and the use of these reports to adjust policies and strategies based on the results obtained.

Identifying the factors that impact the well-being of children in the Republic of Moldova is essential for developing policies and interventions that can improve the living conditions of this vulnerable population. In this context, children's well-being is a complex concept, influenced by a wide range of economic, social, educational, and health factors. The level of family income influences children's access to essential resources such as food, clothing, education, and medical services. Families with low incomes may struggle to provide children with an adequate standard of living. The stability and security of parental employment contribute to the economic stability of the family, which has a direct impact on children's well-being. Access to quality education is a crucial factor for children's intellectual and social development. Lack of access to education or poor-quality education can limit children's future opportunities. Participation in cultural, sports, and extracurricular educational activities contributes to children's social and intellectual development. Access to adequate medical care, including preventive services, influences children's overall health. Factors such as the availability of pediatricians and vaccination coverage are important indicators. Access to a balanced and healthy diet is essential for the optimal growth and development of children. Malnutrition can have long-term negative effects on both physical and mental health. Living conditions, including safety, available space, and access to essential utilities, play an important role in children's well-being. A healthy living environment, including access to green spaces and a safe community, contributes to children's physical and mental well-being. Stable and harmonious family relationships provide children with a sense of security and emotional support, which is essential for their development. Social protection programs, including child allowances and assistance for vulnerable families, can compensate for economic deficiencies and ensure access to essential resources. Budget allocations for education, health, and social protection directly influence children's access to essential services and, consequently, their well-being. The implementation and enforcement of child rights protection legislation are fundamental for ensuring a safe and fair environment for children's development. Community support,

including access to community services and support networks, contributes to children's well-being by providing them with opportunities for socialization and development. A safe community environment, free from violence or other risks, is essential for children's physical and mental health. Parental migration for work can affect children's emotional stability, but remittances can improve the family's economic situation and, therefore, the child's well-being. The integration of migrant children into the educational system and the community is crucial to ensure equal opportunities and access to resources. Identifying and analyzing these factors enables the development of specific policies and programs aimed at improving the level of children's well-being in the Republic of Moldova, aligning it with European standards. A concerted effort by the government, non-governmental organizations, and the community can contribute to creating a safer, healthier, and more equitable environment for all children in the country.

Recent trends in the situation of children's well-being in the Republic of Moldova. Between 2020 and 2022, the Republic of Moldova recorded a significant increase in the number of children with disabilities, a problem that directly affects the well-being of the most vulnerable members of society. According to official data, the number of children with disabilities increased from 1,243 in 2020 to 1,583 in 2022, representing an increase of approximately 27.4%. This rise highlights a growing need for specialized services and integration programs to ensure these children have access to education, healthcare, and social activities adapted to their needs. Among the categories of disabilities, mental and behavioral disorders saw the largest increase, with a 75.2% rise, from 237 cases in 2020 to 415 cases in 2022. These data are alarming and indicate an urgent need for interventions in the area of children's mental health. Congenital malformations, deformities, and chromosomal abnormalities also increased significantly, from 312 cases in 2020 to 377 in 2022, representing a 20.8% rise. These figures underscore the necessity for more effective preventive interventions and prenatal and postnatal monitoring programs. Regarding childhood vaccination, coverage in the Republic of Moldova remained high, although some notable declines were recorded in 2022. For example, coverage for the tuberculosis vaccine (BCG) dropped from 98% in 2020 to 96% in 2022. Similarly, coverage for the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine (MMR) decreased from 97% in 2020 to 94% in 2022. An analysis of child morbidity shows a significant increase in cases of infections with Salmonella, Escherichia coli, and enteritis, with increases of up to 78.7% for Escherichia coli infections and 71.5% for enteritis. Additionally, the incidence of respiratory tuberculosis increased by 145.5%, signaling an urgent need for intervention in this area. On the other hand, certain infectious diseases saw significant decreases, such as COVID-19 (-97.9%) and influenza (-96.5%), reflecting the effects of vaccination campaigns and preventive measures implemented during the pandemic. These changes may have serious long-term consequences, contributing to the emergence of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. In the area of education and cultural activities for children, the Republic of Moldova experienced both increases and decreases. For example, the number of extracurricular educational

institutions, such as creativity centers, increased from 82 in 2020 to 87 in 2022, reflecting greater interest in educational and recreational activities. However, the number of libraries for children decreased from 35 in 2020 to 32 in 2022, and the number of youth tourist centers dropped from 15 in 2020 to 13 in 2022. In terms of children's participation in cultural activities, the data shows an increase in the number of children attending libraries, from 28,500 in 2020 to 31,200 in 2022, representing a 9.5% increase. Conversely, the number of children participating in activities organized by youth tourist centers decreased from 8,200 in 2020 to 7,600 in 2022, indicating a 7.3% decline.

Conclusions. The analysis of children's well-being in the Republic of Moldova between 2020 and 2022 reveals a mix of progress and challenges. A significant increase in the number of children with disabilities, particularly in mental and behavioral disorders, highlights the urgent need for specialized health and social services. While overall vaccination coverage remains high, slight declines in immunization rates for key vaccines such as BCG and MMR are concerning, particularly in the context of rising infections like respiratory tuberculosis. Education and cultural activities for children have shown both improvements, with an increase in extracurricular institutions, and declines, such as the reduction in the number of libraries and youth tourist centers. These trends underscore the importance of ensuring continued investment in educational and cultural infrastructure, especially in rural areas. The economic and social factors influencing children's well-being, such as family income, access to quality education, healthcare, and a safe living environment, remain crucial areas for policy development. The increase in poverty-related illnesses and the rising number of children facing multiple deprivations point to the need for targeted interventions aimed at reducing inequalities and ensuring that all children have access to essential services.

Given the increase in children with disabilities, particularly those with mental and behavioral disorders, it is essential to expand specialized services, including mental health support, rehabilitation programs, and inclusive education. Strengthening partnerships between government, NGOs, and local communities will be key to achieving this. The rise in congenital malformations and infectious diseases, coupled with slight declines in vaccination coverage, calls for stronger preventive healthcare measures. This includes reinforcing prenatal and postnatal care, improving vaccination campaigns, and expanding public health awareness to address emerging health challenges like respiratory tuberculosis. To prevent vaccine-preventable diseases, Moldova should strengthen its vaccination programs, ensuring that coverage does not continue to decline. Continuous monitoring and campaigns to raise awareness among parents about the importance of childhood immunization are necessary. To ensure equitable access to educational and cultural resources, the government should prioritize investment in maintaining and expanding libraries, youth centers, and extracurricular activities, especially in rural areas. This investment is crucial for children's intellectual and social development. Social protection measures should be expanded to support vulnerable families,

particularly those with children at risk of multiple deprivations. The government should enhance financial assistance programs, provide subsidies for healthcare and education, and ensure that all children have access to basic living standards. To better understand and address the challenges facing children in Moldova, continuous monitoring and evaluation systems need to be developed. Adopting harmonized methodologies, such as the European Statistical System (ESS) and Child Well-being Index (CWI), will ensure that Moldova's data collection aligns with EU standards, allowing for more effective policy formulation. Address the specific needs of children from migrant families by developing integration programs that focus on their emotional well-being, educational support, and social inclusion. Support services should also be extended to families relying on remittances, ensuring their economic stability and children's well-being. Engage communities in the support and development of child-centered programs, such as safe living environments, access to cultural and recreational activities, and social networks. Encouraging community participation will help create more inclusive and supportive environments for children's growth. By addressing these recommendations, the Republic of Moldova can improve the well-being of its children, reduce disparities, and ensure that its child population thrives in a safe, healthy, and supportive environment.

Acknowledgments: The article was developed within the framework of Subprogram 030101 „Strengthening the resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability of the economy of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the accession process to the European Union”, institutional funding.

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