

How has economic growth served our children?

Community

Society

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The right of play and independent mobility of children in Malta is obstructed by at least two key factors: the high (and rising) ratio of built-up area and astronomical (and rising) number of cars. Photo: Shutterstock.com

In a recent report issued by the UNICEF, a comparison of childrens' well-being in various countries was made. Malta was considered to do well by children on some fronts. For instance, there are no unmet childcare needs and no shortage of access to safe water. And yet, Maltese children demonstrate rather poor well-being outcomes by the metrics this report.

Indeed, of all the countries surveyed, only two other countries besides Malta (Chile and the US) rank in the bottom third of rankings for each of the three domains of well-being outcomes measured, namely mental well-being, physical health and skills. Among EU member states, Malta appears to be the worst place for children to be, bar Bulgaria.

Understanding why Maltese children demonstrate such poor ranking requires us to unpack these broad domains to see what is actually being measured. The way that skills are measured, for instance, focuses on proficiency in reading and mathematics and social skills, with data drawn from the PISA (OECD) report.

It remains immensely problematic that one in four children in Malta do not have basic math and reading proficiency by the age of 15. The COVID-19 challenges will likely widen disparities in educational achievement.

Measures of physical health include consideration of being overweight or obese as well as child mortality. Almost one in four Maltese children are overweight or obese. Mental well-being includes children's life satisfaction and suicide rates.

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Three out of 10 children in Malta score less than five on 10 for life satisfaction on what is known as the Cantril ladder scale. This involves asking them to self-assess their own life satisfaction on a scale from zero to 10. The average is low by adult standards, and even more worrying for children. It is comparable to the well-being of children in Korea and the US.

Linked to both these results is the sorry finding that Maltese children are among the least likely of all the children interviewed to agree with the statement that there are enough places to play.

There is considerable research to show that children's independent mobility and their use of public open spaces is highly important for their well-being. Spending time outdoors helps them to develop physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally.

Yet the right of play and independent mobility of children in Malta is obstructed by at least two key factors: the high (and rising) ratio of built-up area, and the astronomical (and

rising) number of cars.

A small territory may well be blamed for its built area density. But it is hard to reconcile with the continued encouragement of cars as the main mode of transport.

Despite much research documenting these phenomena and several strategies to address these issues, on paper, yet the practice in the (ever shrinking) field, continues to be one that gives more space to the built environment, more space to vehicles and less space to children – or adults for that matter. This is worrying.

In the field of behavioural economics, scientific research from Malta (and in other countries) documents the direct, positive and significant relationship between access to good environmental quality and well-being. By corollary, pollution and reduced access to nature will exert an increasingly negative pressure on well-being.

The report concludes that living in a rich nation does not guarantee well-being among children. This disconnect between ‘narrow’ economic success and the broader goal of well-being has long been discussed in economics.

A growth in GDP ticks some of the necessary boxes for well-being – but not all. Indeed, it may even work against the achievement of some of the conditions (social, environmental) necessary for a good life.

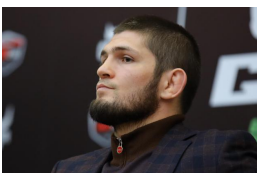
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