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## Policy Brief: Enhancing the wellbeing of children and young people in Malta

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March 2024

1. The authors undertook a study to identify the wellbeing experiences and needs of children and young people living in Malta in order to recommend policy actions to enhance their wellbeing. The study forms part of the Wellbeing INDEX project led by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the University of Malta. It explores the various dimensions of children's subjective wellbeing and how they vary by age, gender, nationality/language, disability, and socio-economic status.

2. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the study adopts a children's rights perspective, with children seen as active agents having the competence of forming their own views and consequently the right to participate in the study. A total of 364 children and young people aged 7 to 15 years old completed questionnaires on their living situation, home and family relationships, money and possessions, friends and other relationships, local area, school, leisure and free time, health, their rights, and overall subjective wellbeing.

3. Most of the participants enjoy a high level of wellbeing and are satisfied with the various aspects of their lives. However, a closer look at the findings suggests that the level of satisfaction is not uniform across the domains or demographics. There are relatively lower levels of satisfaction with particular aspects within the domains studied, such as participation in family decisions, having enough friends and seeing friends frequently; dealing with academic pressure and peer bullying at school; the available space for play and socialising, and the level of pollution in the neighbourhood; physical health complaints such as frequent headaches, stomach-aches and backaches, as well as negative affect such as boredom, sadness, stress, loneliness, and anxiety.

4. The data also reveals some interesting age and gender differences, with the older participants becoming less satisfied with various aspects of their lives, boys experiencing more bullying, and adolescent girls experiencing more negative feelings and moods. As children move into adolescence, they appear to spend less time engaged in physical exercise and sports, and more time on TV and social media. Particular groups of children reported a lower level of wellbeing and less satisfaction with various aspects of their lives when compared to their peers, namely children and young people from lower socio-economic status, from a migrant background, and those with disability.

5. The study makes several policy recommendations to enhance the wellbeing of children and young people in Malta, including a national policy on the promotion of mental health of children and young people, drawn up by an inter-ministerial committee together with the children and young people themselves, and in consultation with parents, schools, the community and mental health services. Such a policy needs to recognise that mental health is a right for all children and young people and that they have the right to be adequately supported to enjoy wellbeing. This policy may also include a national

strategy to promote physical exercise, sports and nature-based activities for children and young people, complemented by continued efforts to create safe, adequate, accessible, developmentally appropriate and free exercise, sports, play, nature and social spaces for children and young people in designated areas in the local communities.

6. Given that most young adolescents are still at school until the age of 16, schools have a crucial role, in collaboration with other stakeholders and agencies, to support the mental health and wellbeing of students at risk through interdisciplinary and non-stigmatising interventions. Current socio-economic challenges are challenging schools to move beyond limited sectoral goals and build new collaborations with other sectors to reimagine education to become more relevant and compassionate, promoting wellbeing, mental health and inclusion as core educational objectives. A whole school, systemic approach to wellbeing and mental health requires the mobilisation of the whole school community in collaboration with other stakeholders, in promoting the wellbeing of all its members. This requires that schools are provided with the required physical and human resources and training to provide such provisions and services effectively.

7. Local communities and services may seek to provide more accessible and inclusive environments for children identified as being at risk, including multidisciplinary, community-based support centres and services in communities and shared intercultural, communal spaces for connection in local towns and villages.

8. At least one in five of the participants complained of peer bullying at school or in the neighbourhood, and sibling bullying at home. While considerable work is being undertaken in schools and by various agencies services and non-governmental organisations to address peer bullying, further efforts are needed to raise awareness on what to do when experiencing victimisation, on how systems such as schools, homes and community spaces may become safer and more inclusive, and how bystanders (peers, friends, siblings) may behave. There also needs to be a particular strategic focus on addressing bullying against minorities and other children who are more at risk of bullying.

9. While there is increasing awareness on the need to listen to and consult with children and young people, in many instances this may not be accomplished in actual practice, such as at home, life in the community, use of services, local governance, and at school, amongst others. The findings of the study, supported by international literature, show that autonomy and sense of agency are highly related to children's and adolescents' subjective wellbeing. Children and young people themselves should be at the centre in the planning and implementation of these and other initiatives to promote and support their wellbeing.

10. Further research may help to support the findings of the present study and lead to additional and more conclusive findings on the wellbeing of children and young people living in Malta.

**\*The Wellbeing INDEX project is a strategic initiative, led by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society in collaboration with the University of Malta. The name "INDEX" summarizes the project's scope (Indicators, Networking, Data, Exploration and exchange). The project, launched in Parliament on the 10<sup>th</sup> December 2020, will pave the way for the measurement of wellbeing in Malta and evidence-based policy.**