



EVALUATING POLICIES TO LEVEL UP THE GRADIENT IN HEALTH INEQUALITIES

In November 2011 the [European Portal for Action on Health Inequalities](#) was launched by the European Commission. Developed by EuroHealthNet, on behalf of the Equity Action Programme, it provides a source of information on health inequalities, social determinants of health and on Health in All Policies. According to Caroline Costongs, Deputy Director of EuroHealthNet, "...it is essential to boost those policies that tackle health inequalities. This new Web-site represents an important tool towards more information about how to combat them".

Yet the evidence base defining which policies and interventions are most effective in reducing health inequalities is still extremely weak. This applies in particular to those policies and interventions that aim to level up the social gradient in health inequalities. It is important therefore that policies and interventions that seek to influence the social gradient in health need to be more adequately evaluated. This is by no means an easy and straightforward task. There are a number of challenges that need to be faced. No single study can demonstrate which policies are the most effective and there is a need therefore to invest in evaluation to build up an aggregated body of evidence over time. The measurement and monitoring of inequalities in health is not standardised or common across all countries and over time; therefore the choice of the measures selected will influence the results. No consensus has yet been reached on the best and most meaningful measures since the choice of measures is

mainly depending on availability of data, on the determinant chosen to be assessed, and on the nature of policy action that needs to be evaluated or monitored. As a result, it is difficult therefore to find evidence of effective policies and their related actions that actually level-up the gradient in health inequalities. This has provided a major challenge for the Gradient Project.

In order to tackle this challenge the Gradient Evaluation Framework (GEF) has been developed as a core part of the Gradient project. GEF is a European action-oriented policy tool to inform technical experts in public health and guide their evaluation of public health policies that have a focus on health inequalities to level up the gradient among children, young people and their families. It is intended to facilitate the evaluation of policy actions for their current or future use in terms of their 'gradient friendliness' i.e. their potential to level-up the gradient. An important underpinning principle of the Gradient approach is that evaluation rarely produces a decisive conclusion - it reduces uncertainty about the consequences of a choice.

It is important to understand in practical terms the meaning and purpose of evaluation especially in a real world setting. Evaluation helps to frame the issues and sharpen the focus on how we think about health inequalities. Explaining the socio-economic gradient in health is a political issue. Evaluation is

by no means a technical activity alone; it is underpinned by values and ideology. Evaluation therefore is inherently political and context specific - the nature, culture, and political system of a country, its history, the role of its civil society, and availability of data/indicators within the country are all important factors to consider.

GEF incorporates evaluation as integral to systematic programme development that needs to be carried out at all levels of policy planning, development and implementation. This approach enables a more holistic understanding of the black box between a policy action's inputs and outcomes. GEF builds on theory-based evaluation and more realist approaches which explore how policy mechanisms influence outcomes by operating in different contexts. In this way we begin to highlight the importance of how social and institutional contexts condition the ways policy actions work. A review copy of GEF has recently been pre-tested and reviewed by experts from many European countries. It is proving to be a first developmental step in applying more realist evaluation approaches to help us achieve greater clarity on, and contribute to our understanding of, the effectiveness of policies to tackle the major challenge of the health inequalities gradient.

John Kenneth Davies, University of Brighton.

December 2011



Spotlight on the Gradient Evaluation Framework

The GRADIENT project has identified important aspects that can contribute to the success of policies in reducing health inequalities and leveling up the health gradient. The Gradient Evaluation Framework (GEF) has structured some of these key factors in an evaluation tool. The tool can help policy makers and advisors, project planners and project evaluators to more efficiently incorporate measures and target interventions towards leveling up the health gradient. This means recognizing the impacts that circumstances in childhood have over the life course and suggests that policy interventions aiming to reduce the health gradient should be targeted at children and youth for lifelong outcomes.

The GEF is applicable both to public health policies with a combination of mixed actions and interventions; to specific health initiatives and policies dealing with a certain health aspect (such as smoking or physical activity) as well as to policies that do not directly deal with health but that target the social determinants of health inequalities (for example social exclusion, school dropout or early education).

One dimension of the GEF offers a way to look at policies through a Gradient Equity Lens (GEL). The GEL is composed of questions and issues that the user should take into consideration to visualize the policy's impact on the health gradient among children and families. These points aim to link the particular policy to the circumstances around children's health such as economy, education, housing etc. The GEL thereby provides users with a guide to making the links between policy, the wider determinants of health with the health gradient.

The GEF is therefore a tool that can further help policy makers to see and consider wider levels that the policy could affect or should target to have a greater impact on child health. This process may also help policy makers or officials gain a greater understanding of the complexity of the health gradient and its underlying factors. Using the GEF may thereby lead to increased intersectoral collaboration in policy interventions which may be beneficial for all sectors involved. The use of this innovative tool may hence help to mainstream the tackling of systematic health inequalities and the health gradient into a wider range of policies.

The GEF does not present solutions to solving the health gradient, nor does it ensure successful policies. However it is a tool which can help to make policies more efficient in tackling health inequalities through understanding their intersectoral complexity. The GEF is also a way of hopefully maintaining and increasing political momentum to level up the health gradient among children.

The GEF will be finalized and published on the [GRADIENT](#) website and the [European Portal for Actions on Health Inequalities](#) by the beginning of February 2012.

Mikaela Persson, Giorgio Barbareschi
EuroHealthNet

In our next issue:
[The GRADIENT Book](#)

Reading tips

1. **Chiotan, C., Costongs C.** (2010) *Can we build on existing information systems to monitor health inequities and the social determinants of health in the EU?* Brussels, EuroHealthNet. - [Download here](#)
2. **CSDH** (2008) *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health.* Geneva, WHO. - [Download here](#)
3. **Kelly, M.P., Morgan A., Bonnefoy, J., Butt, J., Bergman V.,** (2007). *The social determinants of health: developing an evidence base for political action.* Santiago, WHO. - [Download here](#)
4. **Milton, B., Moonan, M., Robinson, D.T., Whitehead, M.** (2010) *How can the health equity impact of universal policies be evaluated? Insights into approaches and next steps.* Liverpool, WHO. - [Download here](#)
5. **Smith, R.D., Petticrew, M.** (2010). Public health evaluation in the twenty-first century: time to see the wood as well as the trees. *Journal of Public Health*, 32(1):2-7.

GRADIENT Publications

Davies J.K., Sherriff N.S. (2011). The gradient in health inequalities among families and children: A review of evaluation frameworks. *Health Policy* 101:1-10

The publication can be found on the Gradient website: <http://www.health-gradient.eu/GRADIENT/EN/publications/>

Gradient Progress & Highlights

The Fourth and final Project Steering Groups meeting for the GRADIENT project was held on 15-16th December 2011 in Brussels, Belgium. The GRADIENT book as well as the policy recommendations were discussed to be finalized in for the publication of the book in the spring 2012.

The GRADIENT project was present at the EUPHA conference in Copenhagen, Denmark on 10-11th November 2011. A workshop was held and the different work packages had a chance to present their work.

The GEF was presented and discussed at an expert meeting in Helsinki, Finland on 17-18th November 2011. The GEF has undergone a review process and with the results from this as well as the expert input, the framework is now being revised to its final form.

The GRADIENT book has further developed and will be finalized for publication in the beginning of 2012.

Get involved

Dissemination of the GRADIENT project

As the GRADIENT project is coming to an end, the results are soon ready for dissemination. We seek partners and events concerned with Health Equity and/or Child, Youth and Family Health where our project results can be put forth from February- April 2012. If you or your organization are hosting, participating or know of such opportunities please contact the GRADIENT project coordinator **Giorgio Barbareschi** at **EuroHealthNet**.

Join the European Portal for Action on Health Inequalities

On the 14th of November 2011 the European Portal for Action on Health Inequalities www.health-inequalities.eu has been launched. The new website is an exhaustive source of information on health inequalities at EU, national and regional level, on social determinants of health and on Health in All Policies. It aims to provide visitors with practical and useful information and to give them opportunities to promote their own work.

www.health-gradient.eu

News and Events

OECD-Norway Roundtable: 'Starting Strong: Implementing Policies for High Quality ECEC'

23-24 January 2012

The OECD-Norway High-level Roundtable taking place in Oslo, Norway has the objectives to:

- Focus attention on the economic and social importance of investing in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)
- Highlight key policies and practices that can enhance investment in high-quality early childhood education and care in countries
- Share perspectives and foster dialogue with, and among, stakeholders to promote understanding of the implementation challenges and how to address them

Participants will include Ministers, legislators; government officials; kindergarten and childcare owner representatives; union representatives and practitioners; parental representatives; and media.

[More info](#)

OECD Education Policy Committee Meeting- Overcoming School Failure: Policies that Work.

During the Policy Committee meeting, February 2-3 the OECD intends to discuss policies to overcome school failure. The OECD project Overcoming School Failure: Policies that Work provides evidence on the policies that are effective to reduce school failure by improving low attainment and reducing dropout, and proactively supports countries in promoting reform. The project builds on the conceptual framework developed in the OECD's No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education (2007).

[More info](#)

The Global Summit on Childhood. 28 March 2012, Washington DC, USA.

A "Global Summit on Childhood" conference will be held in Washington, DC, in spring 2012, presented by the Association of Childhood Education International. It is hoped to raise public awareness about challenges facing childhood today. This will be discussed through discussing: Childhood perspectives from around the world, Supporting a positive childhood experience, Implications of a changing society for childhood and Giving voice to children.

[More info](#)

BASPCAN 8th National Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect. April 2012, Belfast, United Kingdom

BASPCAN's congresses provides opportunities for professionals from a range of disciplines from across the United Kingdom and the international arena to share the latest findings from research and to debate how families may be supported and children kept safe. The 2012 congress will have a focus on: Innovations and interventions, Neglect and emotional abuse, Children and young people living with family or community violence, Sexual abuse and exploitation, Supporting and developing response to hard-to-engage groups and Young people in transition.

[More info](#)

News and Events

26th Conference of the European Health Psychology Society (EHPS)

The next EHPS Conference will be held in Prague (Czech Republic) on 21st - 25th August 2012.

The Conference theme "Resilience and health" ranges from the traditional psychological and medical "body – mind" topic to the new perspectives which also incorporate the social determinants of health. The scientific programme will offer large range of presentations, discussions and meetings from distinguished keynote lectures to thematic symposia, thematic sessions and interactive posters.

The online registration and abstract submission will open on January 2nd 2012.

[More info](#)

EUROCHILD: Promoting the rights of children in alternative care across Europe

EuroChild concluded the Annual Conference, which was held on 24th -26th October 2011 in Sofia, with a call for action to the European Union and the Member States.

The conference highlighted the urgency for recommendation on child poverty and well-being, in order to provide a clear framework for the EU and Member States.

To encourage this process EuroChild will publish in 2012 a Compendium of Inspiring Practice.

[More info](#)

Universal Children's Day: UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina promotes children's rights and equity

The date 20 November marks the day on which the UN General Assembly adopted the [Declaration of the Rights of the Child](#), in 1959, and the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), in 1989.

The aim of [Universal Children's Day](#) is to put public initiatives and

campaigns in place to raise awareness of children's rights worldwide, awareness of their situation in life, problems, wishes, needs and longings as well as to enable exchanges and meetings between them.

For the occurrence UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) organized a two-week series of events to promote children's rights and equity with a special attention to the most vulnerable and excluded categories of children. The events covered main priority areas for UNICEF in BiH including: social protection and inclusion, early childhood development, mother and child health, inclusive education, child protection, advocacy for children's rights and justice for children.

[More info](#)

Consultation on Child and Poverty at DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

On the 14th of December a Stakeholder Consultation Meeting on Child Poverty has been organised at DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion to provide Recommendations for the European Commission.

EuroHealthNet strongly supported the initiative. Based on the results of the Gradient project it was underlined that there is now much evidence that intervening positively for health improvement in early years by means of community actions and policy initiatives has important societal benefits.

Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study - Results from the 2009/10 Survey

Outcomes from the HBSC survey 2009/2010 will be presented in their fifth international report, which is expected to be released by spring 2012. The report will present key findings on patterns of health and health behaviour among young people aged 11, 13 and 15 years in 39 countries and regions across the WHO European Region and North America in 2009/2010. The report will highlight gender, geographic and socioeconomic inequalities, with the aim to influence policy and practice, in order to improve young people's health.

For further information about the HBSC study, refer to:
<http://www.hbsc.org/>