Comment paper, French delegation

Comment on the presentation “Building an economic case for child centred family and parenting support” by Andy Bilson at the Galway School 2015, by the French delegation (Flora Bolter, ONED; Bénédicte Jacquey-Vazquez, Apprentis d’Auteuil; Claude Martin, CNRS).

The economic case for child-centred family and parenting support as underlined by Andrew Bilson in this article is a very solid one that draws from a variety of contexts and studies. The added social value of such services is well documented, and that we do not contest.

Evidence demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of family support as opposed to placement is strong in international literature. In spite of this, France still hasn’t developed a strong family and parenting support sector. About 80% of the 6.9 Billion EUR spent by France on child protection goes to housing orders, by which a child is placed out of their parent’s home, either in residential or in foster care. This means that the brunt of the investment goes to interventions after the family is separated - even though 52% of all child protection orders correspond to targeted in-home interventions. Some if not most of these placement orders might be avoided if support-orientated interventions had taken place in due time. Our system doesn’t systematically provide for family and parenting support, unless it is both targeted and mandated (by a court or administrative order): regarding parenting issues, parents as a rule don’t have a service to turn to for advice.

At local level, public services and NGOs have identified this gap and developed a few promising practices: an example is the Maisons des Familles that Apprentis d’Auteuil has been designing and operating in Grenoble, Marseille and Amiens since 2009. These centres are open to all and provide a variety of services: advice, orientation to specialized services, support, meetings with professionals and/or other parents (discussion groups, workshops on specific themes...). The aim is to build with families, not against them: the support that is given is non-judgmental, and remains a suggestion that is discussed with the family, not a decision that is imposed. This service is working so well that Apprentis d’Auteuils will operate a total of 20 such structures by the year 2017.

Despite this type of innovative practices at local level or from civil society, the overall system focuses mostly on “curative” rather than preventative interventions with families: in terms of reducing poverty and preventing long-lasting problems for the children, the French system is not very efficient, and it is important for us to rely on well-structured demonstrations such as Andy Bilson’s to make the economic case for parenting support services.

However, the presentation doesn’t explicitly address what, to us, is a major problem to convince decision-makers, and that is the fact that the social return on investment, while undeniable, occurs at global social level and on the long term: decision-makers for social affairs and services typically have to make decisions that will be accounted for on a very
short term and from a very narrow economic perspective. In other terms: the entities doing
the spending are not necessarily the ones receiving the benefits, and the results from
opening a new service may take some time to become apparent. What may seem like a
good investment for a society on the long run may not be beneficial for the structure or
administration that needs to invest, at least not immediately. Even if the cost of parental
support services is compared to the cost of a placement measure, as is the case in this
presentation, which is a comparison that would be immediately understandable to a
decision maker in child protection services, we need to factor in time as well as the
necessity to maintain some placement in any case.

This raises the issue of what political level could equalize the various departments and
entities that should be factored in and allow for a broader, more long-term perspective of
the evolution of society. With social services, benefits, justice, education and employment
services being dealt with by different entities, if we want to avoid a gridlock situation on
these issues, we need to encourage an all-embracing, integrated approach that is
difficult to construct at local level: in France, this role is typically given to the state as
strategist (Etat-stratège), but decentralization has impacted this role when it comes to
social services. Europe could be an inspiration for states, in that it can fund and
disseminate studies and results at a very broad level.

And this brings us back to Andy Bilson’s presentation and the very important strategic
issue it has raised: purely economic cases are useful, but can’t suffice in and of themselves.

Social return on investment arguments are very important, but the elephant in the room is
that they require the audience to take into account not just their service’s interest but also
the interest of society as a whole, which for systemic reasons is not necessarily feasible at a
given decision-maker’s responsibility level (the requirement to balance the books or save
may be overwhelming for instance). We need to address all levels of decision-making, and
for that we also need a broader picture than just economic arguments.

In addition, studies in communication and the effectiveness of messages concerning social
change have argued in recent years that economic indicators, however important they may
be, can be detrimental to the cause they try to defend by over-emphasising the value of
economic arguments. “Intrinsic” values, such as universalism and benevolence, have been
proven by large-scale psychological research to be negatively connected to extrinsic
values, such as security and hedonism: engaging the latter values through the notion of
“saving” money on prevention counteracts the more general framework of working
towards a more equal society with happier families, even when the economic argument
used goes in favour of this view. This doesn’t mean that these arguments are useless: it just
means the bigger picture needs to be dealt with as well.

Finally, and as a corollary, the very technical nature of economic arguments echoes, at
least in France, with the professionals’ view of evidence-based practices and demonstrated
effective programmes as too heavily protocolised and focused on economic arguments
rather than the children’s well-being. Because setting up a cost-effectiveness study of

1 Kasser, T., Ahuvia, A., Fernandez-Dols, J.M., Grouzet, F.M.E., Kim, Y., Lau, S., Ryan, R.M., Saunders, S.,
Personality and Social Psychology, 89 (5), 800–816.
interventions requires measuring the impact of said intervention, it also requires ongoing evaluation and protocols, which professionals feel distract from the more clinical, individual approach that is at the core of their work. This block with professionals also translates into blocks with service managers and all persons involved in managing service delivery at policy level as well. Getting rid of this block would involve framing the issue in terms that resonate with these professional’s core missions.

The economic case is made: we have substantial evidence showing that this is the case. To promote progress on these questions, we need to go further in terms of advocacy, and this involves both a large-scale, long-term view of our societies and a refinement of the message in terms of intrinsic values.