Polycrisis and Child Wellbeing: Future Avenues Across Europe

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Abstract

Polycrisis, often defined as an interlinking set of crises that have impacted global affairs in complex ways, has affected all aspects of society with children being particularly vulnerable. The purpose of this article is to engage in a critical theoretical discussion on the inter-connectedness between polycrisis, child wellbeing, and policy-making across Europe. Growing Up in Digital Europe (GUIDE) is used as a case study of how micro-data collected in longitudinal studies can help address polycrisis. It is argued that continuous data collection on the wellbeing of children and young people helps support policy making across diverse areas related to children and families that aims to improve children and young people's wellbeing. The article asserts that securing child wellbeing is a precursor to a range of positive outcomes in adulthood, which can then prevent and/ or better manage a host of related crises.

*Key Words***:** Children, Europe, GUIDE, Policy, Polycrisis, Research, Wellbeing

1. Introduction

Global events, from climate change, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine, have combined in recent years to create an interlinking set of crises that have affected economic and political systems in complex and unpredictable ways. Dubbed a 'polycrisis' the idea seeks to illuminate the fact that disparate crises can reinforce and interact with one another creating a set of linked global problems with no single solution. The polycrisis has affected all areas of society with children being particularly vulnerable. Educational losses as a result of the pandemic and the long-term health and social impacts of a prolonged cost of living crisis may affect children for decades to come. It is imperative that policy makers have the ability to track the educational, social, and health trajectories of children and young people in order to address existing, emerging, and future crises to enable them to identify solutions to ameliorate these problems.

Policy responses to globally interlinked problems require sensitivity to national contexts but will also benefit from valid and comparable evidence in order to assess how impacts are felt in different countries. Cross-national comparison is notoriously challenging as most data sources have their own internal logic and are nationally specific. Exceptions to this are cross-sectional surveys, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the European Social Survey (ESS), the World Values Survey (WVS), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children study (HBSC), which have demonstrated that it is possible to collect comparable data at both a European and global level. Increasingly, longitudinal surveys inform policy interventions in relation to the elderly [the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)], family experiences [the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP)], and children and young people [Growing Up in Digital Europe (GUIDE)].

While the discussion on polycrisis and child wellbeing can be applicable globally, this article focuses primarily on Europe. The article starts with an explanation of the term polycrisis. It then provides a definition of wellbeing and analyses the importance of child wellbeing. The article further examines the link between polycrisis and child wellbeing, and the implications of evidence-based policy-making. Moreover, the article presents Growing Up in Digital Europe (GUIDE) as a case study of how longitudinal studies can help address polycrisis. It is argued that continuous data collection on the wellbeing of children and young people helps support policy making that aims to improve children and young people's wellbeing. The article asserts that securing child wellbeing is a precursor to a range of positive outcomes in adulthood, and

that healthy adults are able to solve problems creatively and proactively, to collaborate efficiently and effectively, and as a result to build better-functioning, more stable societies.

2. Understanding Polycrisis

The term 'polycrisis' was first used by French theorist Edgar Morin and co-author Anne Brigitte Kern over two decades ago to describe the complex problems, uncontrolled processes, and general crisis of the planet (Morin & Kern, 1999). In the 2010s, the term was picked up again by the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, to describe the simultaneous refugee crisis, Greek debt crisis, and the consequences of Brexit afflicting Europe (Juncker, 2018). The term has been recently popularised by the historian Adam Tooze to characterise the interactions between the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the climate change (Tooze, 2022). The word 'polycrisis' gained particular attention among international commentators, policymakers, and business elites throughout panel discussions at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos, Switzerland in January 2023 (Serhan, 2023). This was followed by caution raised in its annual Global Risks Report whereby it was stated that the world was very close to a polycrisis in relation to "shortages in natural resources such as food, water, and metals and minerals" (World Economic Forum, 2023, p. 4).

Researchers at the 'Cascade Institute', a research centre focused on the analysis of complex global systems, define 'polycrisis' as the causal entanglement of crises in multiple, inter-connected natural and social systems in ways that can irreversibly degrade humanity's future (Lawrence et al., 2023). The causes and processes of these intertwined, multiple crises are inextricably bound together to create compounded effects (Allouche et al., 2023). A crucial feature of polycrises is the fact that the harms of a host of inter-related crises are different from, and generally worse than, the harms that each crisis would produce in isolation (Lawrence et al., 2022). In other words, the whole is more dangerous than the sum of its parts. Understanding polycrises could prevent potential dangers resulting from 'single crisis' interventions, where action to address one problem inadvertently leads to another problem due to a lack of understanding of complex connections (Allouche et al., 2023). A polycrisis can occur at different scales – local, national, regional, or global – in other words, at any scale that hosts interacting systems (Lawrence et al., 2023).

According to the researchers from the 'Cascade Institute', the world is currently experiencing a global polycrisis, with the inter-connected crises taking place in multiple global systems. The current global interconnected crises include: the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, volatility in food and energy markets, biodiversity loss, geopolitical

conflict, political polarisation, ideological extremism, migration, adverse social impacts of digitalisation, declining institutional legitimacy, and climate change. While this is not humanity's first polycrisis, it is unprecedent insofar as the world is more connected, and our planet's current ecological systems are more destabilised than ever before. This hyper-connectivity and ecosphere destabilisation are amplifying and accelerating simultaneous crisis events worldwide (Lawrence et al., 2023). As argued by Homer-Dixon and colleagues (2022), the governance of the emerging risk of a polycrisis is to a large extent non-existent, predominately given that national and international institutions tend to manage risks as isolated cases.

The same authors postulate that the governance of systemic risks requires a better understanding of global systems' evolving complexity. Pries (2022), the president of the World Health Summit, notes that the current systems for dealing with global crises – including the United Nations (UN) – are ill-equipped to deal with the complexity and impact of polycrisis. While researchers around the world have started to invest time and resources in understanding systemic risks and possible responses, optimal communication and collaboration seems to be lacking. For this reason, to address global systemic risks, Homer-Dixon and colleagues (2022) propose a worldwide scientific collaboration consisting of institutes dedicated to studying mechanisms amplifying and accelerating global systemic risks as well as to specifying potential high-quality interventions. Lawrence and others (2023) further recommend the initiation of an urgent new research programme with the polycrisis concept being put at the centre. This programme can draw on theories and methods in other fields, such as complexity science, network science, and process tracing, to explain the dynamics of crisis interaction.

Empirical research targeting the investigation of how crises interact can guide policymakers and other parties working towards navigating the polycrisis. The analysis conducted by Lawrence and colleagues (2023) points towards three broad policy implications. First, governments should focus on crisis interactions, not isolated crises. Since today's crises are causally entangled, they cannot be understood or addressed in isolation from one another. The need for a comprehensive approach is pressing particularly given that policies that address one crisis might worsen or undermine efforts to resolve others. Second, policymakers should work to address systems' architecture, not only isolated events. The focus should be to change system structures that generate the single crises in the first instance. Third, it is important to exploit high-leverage intervention points as potential opportunities for systemic transformations towards more desirable futures. Thus, if grounded in a specific research

programme focused on improving policy outcomes, the polycrisis concept can help us better address the world's interlinked crises and its effects on individuals in specific locales.

The concept of polycrisis is being increasingly used by reputable international organisations, including the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2023; 2024), which recognise polycrisis as a global threat to human health. A recent study led by Kałwak and colleagues (2024) examined the psychological responses to the experience of multiple crises amongst 403 college students from Poland. The results showed that polycrisis was associated with detrimental health outcomes, including negative affectivity, depressive symptoms, and subjective physical and mental health, particularly for college students from disadvantaged groups (based on gender, sexual orientation, and financial situation). As also noted by Levin-Zamir (2024), the social and economic impacts of polycrisis across different societies result in, and enhance existent, inequalities in health. Pries (2022) further points that the concept of polycrisis clearly demonstrates the interface between health and politics, economy and the environment, and calls for making health a political choice. According to Pries (2022), global health can no longer be focused on disease – it requires strategies for health and wellbeing that are committed to reducing inequalities across the planet.

3. The Importance of Child Wellbeing

3.1 Defining Wellbeing

Historically, two traditions have been employed to explore wellbeing: the hedonic perspective and the eudaimonic perspective. Hedonic wellbeing, also referred to as subjective wellbeing, is associated with momentary enjoyment, pleasure, relaxation, and an individual's subjective feeling of happiness (Springer & Hauser, 2006; Tennant et al., 2007; Mayr & Ulich, 2009). It is seen to comprise life satisfaction, the presence of positive mood, and the absence of negative mood. Hedonic or subjective wellbeing encompasses how people evaluate their own lives in terms of both affective (how one feels) and cognitive components (what one thinks) of wellbeing (Diener et al., 2003). There is considerable evidence that hedonic wellbeing does not provide a full picture of wellbeing, failing to capture the complexity of sociological and philosophical conceptions around the notion of happiness as well as to factor in the longstanding ideas of humanistic and existential schools of thought (Adler et al., 2017).

In contrast to the hedonic approach, the eudaemonic paradigm perceives wellbeing as an ongoing, dynamic process of effortful living by means of engagement in an activity perceived as meaningful (Kopperud & Vittersø, 2008; Vittersø et al., 2009). Proponents of the

eudaemonic approach argue that wellbeing is achieved by living a life of virtue and actualising one's inherent potentials (Delle Fave et al., 2011). There have been different approaches to defining eudaemonia, with researchers identifying several aspects, such as personal growth and meaning in life, purpose, autonomy, competence, self-realisation, mindfulness, self-acceptance, authenticity, values congruence, and social connectedness (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryff, 2013). Although hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives are most often discussed in relation to adult wellbeing, these concepts have also started to be useful in examining children's wellbeing (see for example Estola et al., 2014).

3.2 Children's Wellbeing

A thematic analysis carried out by Basu and Banerjee (2020) identified several environmental factors affecting children's wellbeing, grouped in the following themes: physical environment (including living conditions like neighbourhood characteristics), home environment (including parental involvement, family structure, and family environment), social environment (including peers and the school environment), socio-economic environment (such as the social, political, and economic conditions in one's country), and digital environment (such as the time spent on social media or the use of the internet). The Children's Society survey of school aged children found that a simple measure of how families were getting on was able to explain 20% of the variation in children's subjective wellbeing (Rees et al., 2009). Similarly, the Gutman and others (2010) analysis of longitudinal data indicated that positive family relationships were associated with improvements in children's wellbeing. A study carried out by Newland and others (2014) in rural communities of the United States found that the strongest predictors of child wellbeing were relational, school, and gender variables. Peer and family relationships consistently predicted child wellbeing and life satisfaction. School satisfaction and school climate were further predictive of all child wellbeing indices. Regarding gender, boys reported higher life satisfaction, mental health, and self-image than girls.

In line with the two aforementioned traditional conceptualisations of wellbeing, there are two methodological approaches in measuring child wellbeing: objective and subjective measures. Objective measures of social reality are those which are not filtered by perceptions and are independent from personal evaluations, such as gross domestic product (GDP), household income and wealth, the proportion of children in education, life expectancy, and crime rates. On the other hand, subjective measures are supposed to explicitly express subjective states, such as perceptions, assessments, and preferences (Noll, 2013). The

subjective nature of child wellbeing has been demonstrated through the discrepancies existing between people's perception of children's circumstances and children's perception of their own circumstances, thereby defending the integration of children's own perspective (Fox et al., 2008; Ben-Arieh et al., 2009). There is a growing consensus among researchers in support of considering both subjective and objective wellbeing indicators as a rounded picture of wellbeing (Guillén-Royo & Velazco, 2006; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Children's Worlds, 2019). This approach is also known as the 'holistic approach' (see Goswami et al, 2016).

A further distinction in the literature is between the study of child wellbeing using a developmental perspective versus a children's rights perspective (Pollard & Lee, 2003; Statham & Chase, 2010). A developmentalist outlook tends to adopt measures associated with deficits, such as material deprivation or physical illness. The children's rights perspective of wellbeing tends to focus more on factors which provide opportunities and help children reach their future aspirations (Morrow & Mayall, 2009). The child as the unit of observation is now common, efforts to include the child's perceptions are growing, and there is now a shift from only paying attention to children's physical survival and basic needs in order to save a child's life to children's wellbeing in order to increase a child's quality of life (see Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). There is a general agreement in the literature that child wellbeing is multi-dimensional, contextual, and that it needs to take into account both changes at different developmental levels as well as different life transitions (Statham & Chase, 2010).

The importance of child wellbeing rests on its impact on a range of positive outcomes in adulthood, including better health, academic success, more stable and satisfying relationships, better performance at work, better functioning, higher self-esteem, healthy behaviours, better learning, as well as more creative and holistic thinking (Bogg & Roberts, 2004; Rowe et al., 2007; Seligman et al., 2009; Proctor et al., 2010; Hoyt et al., 2012; Adler et al., 2017). Data from the Medical Research Council (MRC) National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD), also known as the British 1946 birth cohort study, show that children who were rated by teachers as being happy had a higher likelihood of positive midlife functioning and wellbeing, a low probability of lifetime emotional problems, as well as a high level of social support and engagement in social activities as adults (Richard & Huppert, 2011). These associations were independent of childhood cognition, educational attainment, and midlife occupational social class. Research further demonstrates that a healthy early childhood prevents a range of social, health, economic, and legal problems and offers opportunities to make long-term savings in public spending (Grille, 2008; Allen, 2011; Conti, 2020).

4. Polycrisis and Child Wellbeing

  A recent publication by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) considers long-term and cross-disciplinary approaches as crucial in addressing the rise in interconnected, global crises. The report emphasises the importance of thinking and planning for the future in order to ensure the long-term wellbeing of the planet and of humanity. Considering the interests of those in the future and investing in resolving long-term problems now is more cost-effective than waiting until all these problems have occurred. Examples of long-term thinking within governance systems include the creation of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 in Wales, focusing on wellbeing as an organising principle for economies such as the adaptation of the Wellbeing Budget by New Zealand in 2019, the use of strategic foresight methods such as the implementation of foresight output documents in government policy, and the use of horizon scanning approaches as part of risk analyses (UNDP, 2022). Regarding cross-disciplinary thinking, its use is key in holistically understanding the interconnections of complex global problems. This requires cross-disciplinary academic research and evidence, a deeper collaboration, as well as thinking 'outside the box'.

  A global outlook on the children living in a time of polycrisis by UNICEF (2023) lists eight different trends through which polycrisis shapes children's rights and their wellbeing, ranging from the ongoing COVID-19 harms to the negative impact of the internet in increasing the disparities among children. UNICEF (2023) urges leaders to set aside geopolitical tension when it comes to child issues, to prioritize the younger generation, and to take appropriate measures to make the best possible world for tomorrow's children. Investing in early child wellbeing does not only benefit children, but it also creates a foundation for the establishment of more sustainable societies in the future. Today's children will be the leaders of tomorrow and it is thus crucial for them to grow up in a context that helps them foster the necessary skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes to confront the crises of the future and to develop appropriate solutions (Spies, 2011). The way children grow up determines the kind of society we live in. A healthy early childhood can prevent a range of social, economic, and legal problems, thus offering opportunities to make savings in public costs and to create better functioning, more stable societies in the future (Grille, 2008; Allen, 2011).

  Another, more recent report by UNICEF (2024) discusses the dynamics between polycrisis, youth, and protests. On the one hand, it elaborates on the impact that polycrisis has had on increasing the vulnerability of children and young people, particularly those who are hitherto marginalised. On the other hand, it touches upon the potential influence that these dynamics can have on protests and demonstrations led by youth. While the report

acknowledges that youth protests can be transformative by contributing to democratisation and better governance, it also cautions about the risks and possibilities of protests to lead to unrest, disruption, polarisation, and human rights violations. Nevertheless, it is argued that if carried out non-violently, youth activism in response to polycrisis can create a collective sense of purpose, which will strengthen institutions that protect human rights, enable meaningful intergenerational dialogue, and serve as a catalyst for positive change. Since the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century, social movements among youth have increasingly built national, regional, and international networks to address a range of global issues, including environmental issues; discrimination on the basis of gender, sexuality, and race; mental health matters; and work conditions (Becquet et al., 2021; Tilly et al., 2020).

Given that polycrisis has both national and international effects, it is important for actionable policies that aim to mitigate the risks that polycrisis has on child wellbeing to be the result of scientific collaborations within and across-countries. According to KidsRight Index Report (2024), which annually and systematically reviews the global state of children worldwide, there has been a 21% rise of serious children's rights violations in armed conflicts around the world in 2024 alone. The report further notes that progress with regards to the United Nations (UN) 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relevant to children is acutely lagging, with only one in three child-related UN SDGs having been met or being on track to be met. The report highlights that polycrisis has had a devastating impact on children and their rights by undermining decades of progress on the protection of the next generation across the world. Additionally, SOS Children's Villages (2023) observes that 2.4 billion children worldwide are still in need of adequate social protection and that polycrisis has only worsened the historic disadvantages that many children face. Entangled crises only increase the vulnerability of children who already lack a safe, loving, and secure home environment, by making them more prone to abuse, violence, and exploitation.

5. Policy Processes and Implications

The negative impact of factors that contribute to inequality and which can be understood as threats to wellbeing are often interconnected (Milbourne, 2005). Such phenomena, which were previously described as "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973), were often considered within a national context. Polycrisis can be regarded as a new way of describing something that analysts have long been aware of in the need to appreciate that narrowly defined models oversimplify complex social processes, but importantly, where some of the causal factors are macro and international. Both terms capture phenomena which are

difficult to define, involve complex interdependencies, and are resistant to resolution. Tackling interconnected problems is particularly difficult because of the challenges with regards to clearly identifying their boundaries and causes (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Williams, 2012).

Policies are bound by space and time to the extent that they apply to a specific jurisdiction at a particular point in time. In addition, the intentions for policies are to have differential effects (i.e., not every individual is expected to benefit in the same way), and for those effects to manifest at some point after the policy intervention (i.e., for the policy to result in societal change). This is done to assert the importance of context in various ways in order to understand the dynamics of social processes. Only by doing so can one begin to identify how current inequalities exist by looking at the multiple social, demographic, historical and national/local factors, which help to explain differential life course outcomes. Representing social processes as complex, hierarchical, and longitudinal allows us to appreciate that aiming to reduce inequalities through policy intervention is beset with challenges given that there may be competing explanations for the existence of inequalities in the first place.

A central assumption is that policy-making benefits from data which describe the nature of problems and which can provide an understanding of how different experiences might be patterned. In particular, seeking explanations which are able to predict differential outcomes, point to potential intervention strategies for policy makers. However, policy making takes place within a context bound by ideology, culture, history, and tradition, which means that it would be naive to assume that a statistical model should be the sole, or even the main evidence for an intervention. Nonetheless, it is increasingly the case that developed nations see value in investing in international data collection with a view to assessing relative performance [for example, PISA, HBSC, European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), as described in Richardson & Ali 2014]. Hence, while it may be inappropriate to expect policy makers to reach the same conclusions on the basis of survey findings, it is a plausible aspiration for evidence to, at least, inform the policy making process.

The pragmatic approach of using comparative international survey data within the broader policy process gives the space for an international approach to high quality data collection. This is not to assert that we are moving beyond politics and policy, but instead to argue that all administrations are likely to be interested in measuring the impacts of policy interventions and the extent to which they achieve their goals, in the interests of efficient and cost-effective governance (Nutley et al., 2007; Pankhurst, 2017). Where collecting data and

using it in the policy process is likely to save money in social policy investments this will be of interest to all legislators, whatever their ideology. There are several points in time through which evidence can inform policy-making. The policy cycle is described as a process through which a problem is acknowledged, policy options are identified and addressed, a preferred option is implemented and afterwards evaluated (Pollock et al., 2021a). The decision-making process uses evidence to weight the likely effectiveness of an intervention. Evaluations provide further evidence regarding a policy or intervention to inform decisions for its future funding and improvements required.

Given the impact that childhood wellbeing has on a range of adult outcomes (Statham & Chase, 2010), there is an ongoing acknowledged need for high quality data on child and youth wellbeing, necessary to inform policy making aimed at addressing the UN 2030 SDGs (Pollock et al., 2021b). Birth cohort studies have been central to our understanding of the factors contributing to the enhancement of child wellbeing. However, the majority of these surveys have been developed independently, making cross-country data comparison a challenge. The European Commission (2012) recognises that there is a significant gap in longitudinal comparative European data on children. Growing Up in Digital Europe (GUIDE), funded by the European Union (EU), aims to address this gap by developing a clear, harmonised comparative birth cohort survey across Europe. One of the purposes of GUIDE is to allow researchers and practitioners all over the world to learn from the lived experiences of children and young people as they grow up in a diverse range of European countries. The following section provides a thorough description of GUIDE as a case study of how policy-driven longitudinal studies can address polycrisis by starting from the genesis.

6. Growing Up in Digital Europe (GUIDE): A Case Study

6. 1 What is GUIDE?

Growing Up in Digital Europe (GUIDE) is the first prospective comparative longitudinal accelerated cohort survey on child wellbeing across Europe. It will provide data on a representative sample of new-born babies and a sample of school age children in several European countries, tracking them up until the age of 24. While there are a range of national studies which collect such data [e.g., the Millennial Cohort Study (MCS), the French Longitudinal Study of Children (ELFE), the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)], there has not yet been an international effort to produce harmonised longitudinal data until the European Commission, in 2013, sought to assess the feasibility and desirability of such a survey. The desirability was established through a Europe

wide Delphi survey (Ozan et al., 2018a). Although significant challenges were anticipated, the feasibility was confirmed through consultations with survey experts and methodologists (Ozan et al., 2018b; Pollock et al., 2018). The business case, including a cost benefit analysis (Ecchia et al., 2021) and description of the methodology (Pollock et al., 2021b) followed.

GUIDE was subsequently included on the 2021 iteration of the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) Roadmap in recognition of its importance for the future. Alongside a suite of comparative European social surveys, the GUIDE project is planned to start full wave data collection in 2027 and is set to continue up until the 2050s when the younger cohort will be aged 24. This will provide a rich data set able to track the lives of children from birth to early adulthood. As the data collection process is ongoing, GUIDE will be able to provide information to scientists and policy makers to highlight differences in wellbeing across demographic groups in all participating countries. The research design of GUIDE is centred on an accelerated cohort structure, with the first cohort being 8-year-olds and the second cohort being 9-month-old babies. This design means that policy makers will not need to wait for many years in order to get data on children growing up now in the post-COVID digital era at a time when there is an acute need to know the subjective experiences of children to be able to address challenges related to wellbeing.

The aim of the GUIDE project is to track children's personal wellbeing and psycho-social development, in combination with key indicators of children's family life, homes, neighbourhoods, and schools, across Europe. These measurements will enable researchers from multiple fields to analyse how children's wellbeing develops in response to children's experiences of growing up in different European countries. The harmonised design, with a common questionnaire, a systematic translation protocol, robust sampling strategies and a common approach to fieldwork GUIDE, will create the first internationally comparable, nationally representative, longitudinal study of children and young people in Europe. As a recognised European Research Infrastructure, GUIDE will be an important source of evidence in developing social policies for children, young people, and families across Europe for many years to come. The GUIDE consortium comprises a multi-disciplinary team of experts in survey methodology, child and youth development and wellbeing, demographic science, economics, psychology, and sociology.

6.2 GUIDE's Role in Addressing Polycrisis

GUIDE will have an important role in addressing current and potential future polycrises in four different ways. First, similar to what UNDP (2022) recommends, GUIDE takes a long-

term thinking approach by designing, planning, and implementing research that will be beneficial to the children and societies of the future. It considers child wellbeing as a precursor to a range of positive outcomes in adulthood, including better health, academic success, more stable and satisfying relationships, better performance at work, better functioning, higher self-esteem, healthy behaviours, better learning, as well as more creative and holistic thinking (Bogg & Roberts, 2004; Rowe et al., 2007; Seligman et al., 2009; Proctor et al., 2010; Hoyt et al., 2012; Adler et al., 2017). Healthy adults are able to solve problems creatively and proactively, to collaborate efficiently and effectively, and as a result to build better-functioning, more stable societies.

Second, GUIDE is in line with UNDP's (2022) recommendations of addressing polycrises insofar that it is highly inter-disciplinary. Multi-disciplinarity is at the heart of GUIDE, both in the topics it addresses and in the development of alliances between a wide range of professionals across Europe. The data generated by GUIDE questionnaires will contribute to the fields of sociology, public policy, health sciences, economics, demographic science, family studies, psychology, education, and archive studies. Professionals working for GUIDE have been trained in diverse academic disciplines and work in a variety of different sectors, including academia, non-governmental organisations, research institutes, and inter-governmental organisations, in research, managerial, and administrative roles. GUIDE contributes to cross-cultural research and brings together scientists and professionals from all over Europe, all employing varied modes of working, interacting, and thinking. The work conducted by GUIDE is thus enriched by both the diversity of the academic disciplines it covers and by the wide-ranging backgrounds of the international professionals it collaborates with.

Third, GUIDE will help address polycrisis by providing comparative data and by identifying high-risk societies. The data generated by GUIDE will allow for cross-country comparisons on key dimensions surrounding child wellbeing and family health. The identification of high-risk countries would ensure the effective allocation of resources, foster fruitful collaboration and learning synergies, and contribute towards timely prevention and intervention where it is most needed. Fourth, GUIDE will provide evidence on the impact that global polycrises have on child development across different European countries. GUIDE's research design is that of an accelerated longitudinal cohort survey using two parallel nationally representative samples. The first cohort comprises 8-year-olds and their main carers, and the second cohort the carers of 9-month-old infants, with each cohort being followed every three years until the age of 24. Given that GUIDE is envisioned to start in 2027, having two cohorts will allow for comparisons between the development of children born pre-COVID (2019) and

those born post-COVID (2026-2027). The longitudinal nature of GUIDE will also ensure the multi-dimensional examination of the impact that potential future crises might have on child development across Europe.

GUIDE was recently endorsed by the World Happiness Report (Marquez et al., 2024, p. 94) for being the first cross-national birth cohort study of child wellbeing in Europe. As argued by O'Leary and Fox (2018), longitudinal survey data are useful to policy makers, academics, and practitioners who believe that such a survey would improve the quality and efficiency of public expenditure on wellbeing. They further found that the costs of an European Longitudinal Survey for Children and Young People (ELSCYP) would be a small fraction of the overall expenditure in child wellbeing services, suggesting that very small increases in the cost-effectiveness of such programmes and services would be necessary for the investment in the survey to be worthwhile. Given that the origin of GUIDE stems from European Commission (2012) calls for a pan-European longitudinal study on child wellbeing, it can be deduced that GUIDE is a policy-driven project.

7. Conclusions

This article presents a critical inter-connection between polycrisis, child wellbeing, and evidence based policy-making across Europe, using GUIDE as a case study. We argue that there are advantages in using a polycrisis approach to understanding how child wellbeing can be secured through policy interventions, thus facilitating future positive life outcomes. This is because polycrisis requires the articulation of many inputs, local national and international, to an understanding of how individual wellbeing experiences are felt. These, in turn, suggest potential interventions to promote positive outcomes and decrease negative ones. Importantly, the need for collecting high quality, nationally representative data on subjective wellbeing experiences means that the survey approach is required as it collects data directly from respondents.

A longitudinal approach to data collection is the most suitable mode as it is able to identify changes in wellbeing over time at an individual level and can therefore assess the impact of policy interventions. The establishment of a survey panel, as is being done by the GUIDE project also provides a living laboratory which will be of use in assessing the unfolding of future contingent events as yet unknown. This means that should there be a future pandemic like event such as COVID, or a significant economic downturn, or a climate catastrophe, it will be possible to place the experiences of a representative sample alongside others and link it to previous experiences. The methodology of a comparative longitudinal survey, hence, is an ideal

tool with which to understand the effects of polycrisis on individuals and communities, and address policy interventions where appropriate. Future empirical research is needed to confirm how investing in child wellbeing and comparative longitudinal studies can help prevent polycrisis.

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