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The subjective impact of the Barcelona scheme Fons 0-16 on the lives of children and adolescents and their families

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"Whoever came up with this idea is a genius because it helps us a lot.
"Fatima, a single mother with four children aged 18, 12, 6 and 3
(the youngest has diabetes)³

The article synthesises the preview of results from ethnographic research to gauge the subjective effects of 0-16 Emergency Fund grants on the lives of young children, teenagers and their families. The study, which is intended to complement the quantitative evaluations of the fund carried out by Ivàlua, takes a more detailed look at the perceptions, uses, ratings, and positive and negative experiences from three perspectives: those of the children themselves, of adult family members and of social services professionals. Five preliminary ideas are set out on the subjective impact of the 0-16 Fund, linked to the improvement in the family atmosphere and less stress on relationships; the normalisation of living patterns and experiences; the empowerment of families in terms of managing household finances; uncertainty and limits relating to the grants; and dignity and the shift in outlook from charity to right.

Introduction

This is a preview of the research⁴ started in March 2018 by the Institut Infància i Adolescència in Barcelona (Institute of Childhood and Adolescence - IIAB) as part of BCN 0-17 Observatory: vides i drets de la infància i l'adolescència a la ciutat (BCN 0-17 Observatory: the lives and rights of children and adolescents in the city); a programme organised by Barcelona City Council's Area of Social Rights. Since 2015, Barcelona City Council has awarded social emergency financial assistance to vulnerable families with children under 16 years of age to cover the basic living expenses of the children and adolescents. The qualitative research we are conducting focuses on gathering information on the subjective impact this extraordinary aid fund (from now on, Fons 0-16) has on children and adolescents and their families, as well as specifically proposing three objectives:

- To gain a deeper understanding of the uses, needs, positive or negative experiences and possible barriers to Fons 0-16 in the daily lives of the child and adolescent recipients and their families.

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³All the names in the testimonials have been changed.

⁴The complete report on this research is expected to be available at the start of 2019 at www.institutinfancia.cat.

- To identify the perception of improvement in their well-being in a material and relational sense, incorporating the perspectives of the children themselves as essential informants, as well as the adults in their families and the professionals working at the Institut Municipal de Serveis Socials (IMSS).
- To formulate specific improvement proposals to guide child-related spending policy in future calls or other social services based on the evidence generated about the impact of Fons 0-16.

This qualitative assessment, using ethnographic techniques taken from applied social and cultural anthropology, complements the work to date of Ivàlua⁵, which focuses on different aspects and methodologies. Specifically, the most recent report notes the need to complement assessment with analysis of the effects of financial assistance on children's consumption and well-being. Until this point, families had not been directly asked about the perceived impact, nor had data been included as recounted by the children themselves. The field work we are conducting focuses on in-depth case studies and includes observation, focus groups with professionals and interviews using diverse techniques with adults, children and adolescents from the families. We can therefore share this preview of the results and allow the voices of the IMSS professionals and the mothers and fathers to recount their perceptions of Fons 0-16 and the impact it has on their children's well-being. With that in mind, the information presented here is not conclusive and is pending an essential part of the analysis: the accounts of the children and adolescents.

1. On the importance of income policy to combat child poverty: the complementary role of the City Council

We know that social inequality is growing and is particularly marked during the strategically vital stage of childhood and adolescence. Beyond the figures in the indicators that measure child poverty and social exclusion and show a slight downward trend in Spain, Catalonia and Barcelona, we know that we are still behind most of Europe when it comes to child well-being and are facing a very serious problem with regard to social structure. The impoverishment of children and adolescents is a breach of their human right to an adequate standard of living (Art. 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). This endangers the future course of their lives (in education, work, health) and takes us further away from social cohesion by intensifying the intergenerational transfer of poverty.

The recent creation of a Commissioner for the Fight Against Child Poverty by the Spanish government demonstrates the magnitude of the problem.

The main underlying causes of poverty affecting children and adolescents are also known: their mothers' and fathers' insecure employment situation, the cost of housing (particularly in the city of Barcelona, where over 40% of families with children spend more on housing than the United Nations considers to be affordable), as well as the historic lack of investment of public money in children and social protection policies for their families: while the EU-28 spend 2.4% of GDP on this area, Spain only invests 1.3% and Catalonia 0.8%. The range of financial benefits provided by the administration continues to be low compared to our fellow Europeans and at the same time has little effect on reducing the level of poverty for citizens between 0 and 17 years of age (something which has been achieved for the over-65s through pensions). Most European countries (21 of the 28) provide universal benefits per child and with greater power to reduce monetary poverty.

Here, unfortunately, we have not managed to develop children's policies with broad public support systems, such as income policies to ensure families with children have sufficient resources to ensure their children live and grow up in a healthy and dignified way. We are still immersed in a more family-orientated model and way of thinking in which the prevailing idea is that families bring

⁵In this issue of the journal *Barcelona Societat* there is an article on the evaluations of the calls for applicants for Fons 0-16 in 2015 and 2016 carried out by Ivàlua.

children up privately as best they can. This means that investment and the role played by the Spanish and Catalan governments is much smaller than would be socially desirable and strategic. This is how things are, despite all the research and evidence showing that investment in childhood is an early intervention with a high social return, and despite all the recommendations on its importance, from United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child “Concluding observations in Spain” (CRC/C/ESP/CO/5-6) to the European Commission (Investing in children: breaking the cycle of inequality, 2013/112/UE), also including the report by the Catalan Ombudsman, the Síndic de Greuges de Catalunya (2012 report on child poverty and annual reports on the situation of children’s rights), to many social bodies in Spain and Catalonia (UNICEF, Save the Children, Third Sector Round Table, PINCAT, FEDAIA...) and Municipal Council for Social Welfare in Barcelona.

Against this backdrop, can anything be done? At first glance, and in terms of competences, the answer may seem to be no, but in 2015 Barcelona activated a measure to complement the insufficient measures implemented by higher levels of government⁶. It takes into account the principle of the best interests of children in decision-making (and when assigning resources) and recognises the child as a subject of law. So, since the first version of Fons 0-16, its implementation and coverage has continued to improve: the first version in 2015 provided assistance to 7,500 children (and investment of 9.2 million euros), two years later it reached 17,500 boys and girls in the city (with investment of 17 million euros, excluding the associated subsidised school meals programme).

2. On the research-based approach and the essential perspective of children and adolescents

Social sciences can offer knowledge to shape and drive improvement policies by portraying the reality of the people involved or affected. This is an in-depth case study based on qualitative social anthropology research techniques using a significant and heterogeneous sample. Within the time limitations of the study, it was decided to create relationships of trust and respect between the interviewer and participant, who was interviewed on several occasions, and to allow space for whatever emerged from these conversations and whatever the informants felt was important to explain, rather than only paying attention to the data the research was intended to collect. This research defends a non-extractivist relationship with informants, given that we consider them to be relational subjects rather than *objects of research*.

In this way, the study is based on observation, inclusive engagement (in this case the researcher is also someone who applied for financial assistance) and the contributions of informants (professionals, adults from the families, children and adolescents). The area covered by the study is Ciutat Vella, the district with the highest number of recipients of Fons 0-16 after Nou Barris, which was excluded as it was part of the pilot for the B-MINCOME income scheme, and it was believed this could interfere with data collection.

Entry to the field was facilitated by the IMSS through the social services centres in the Ciutat Vella. Social services professionals invited 10 families to participate in the study. The mothers or fathers who accepted were then asked if their sons and daughters over 6 years of age would like to take part in the research and give their opinions. Families were selected according to the composition of the household, the number of children, the children’s nationality and the length of time they had been receiving Fons, whilst trying to maintain a certain balance between the ages (0-11 and 12-16) and sex of the children. Between 10 and 20 children and adolescents are expected to take part, 10 adults from the families (3 receiving benefits in 2018 for the first time and 7 who were already recipients), and 12 professionals from the IMSS (educators and social workers).

⁶The roll-out of the Guaranteed Citizen’s Income (RGC) in Catalonia at the end of 2017 could bring important changes to the benefits landscape and actions to reduce child poverty, although the Ombudsman has warned that the RGC may be limited in this respect as it does not give children subjective rights nor does it discriminate sufficiently in favour of families with children, or vary the amount awarded depending on whether or not they are young children.

The diversity of the informants provides us with a second level of information based on their direct relationships, and a third level related to what they say about their social or professional environment. In their statements they explain what happens in other families in a similar situation around them: *“All us mothers at school with the card are the same”*. Or else they highlight some isolated anomalies in the use of Fons 0-16 that they have noticed in their neighbourhood.

We chose a research technique for each sample group suited to their particular conditions. A focus group was conducted with professionals from the IMSS, and individual interviews carried out with the mothers and fathers. A specific approach will be used with the children involving observation and interview, which varies according to their age. The aim of triangulating the techniques and diversity of the sample population was to be thorough in how information was obtained, leaving room for each informant to act and make decisions.

3. Five preliminary ideas on the subjective impact of Fons 0-16 on children and adolescents and their families: the voices of adults in the household and the voices of the professionals

As preliminary results of this field work study, we can present 7 important ideas that have arisen from the plurality of the adult voices in the families, and the professionals, and some significant testimonials.

3.1. The family environment: growing up in a less stressful environment

There are many economic, social and personal reasons why people may find themselves in a vulnerable situation and cycles of financial insecurity that often lead to emotional distress and instability, anxiety and low self-esteem. In these circumstances, the experience of opportunity that Fons can provide is perceived as valuable.

“Fons has been a breath of fresh air in my life.” Aine, mother of Lila (9 years old)

Fons 0-16 plays a role in reducing the stress people experience trying to meet their living expenses and ensure essential items are provided. The consequent effects on the family environment are clearly seen in the lighter mood of the adults in the household and this has a direct effect on the child’s emotional well-being. The mothers and fathers interviewed stated the positive impact of Fons 0-16 on their lives and the lives of their children, as there was less tension in the family environment due to the financial assistance provided to cover costs such as housing, food, school and leisure, which are higher due to having children.

“I get €300 unemployment benefit, but the rent is €500, and it’s not just the rent, there’s the electricity, water, my daughter, after-school clubs, food. Because you’ve got to feed a child on €300 a month. I mean, if you’re on your own you can eat a lot of rice...” Aine, mother of Lila (9 years old)

All the informants stated that the arrival of Fons gave them peace of mind, and that it is a key benefit to complement and help them manage other benefits. They affirmed that they are less stressed, less aggressive and this shows in their emotional well-being. The reduced financial burden on the family allows them to focus on their children’s other needs, which are emotional rather than economic.

3.2. Towards the “normalisation” of life experiences and cycles

A first element of normalisation that was particularly highlighted and declared as positive by all the adult informants was the automatic granting of financial assistance to pay for free school meals, which covers this service five days a week throughout the school year. As the professionals stated, this is not only about eating well and nutrition, it is also a socialising space that is protected and “normalising”. Some adults in the families stated that it would make sense if the only element of Fons 0-16 that remained was the systematic granting of financial assistance for free school meals, as the scheme ensures a key childhood need is met. They also greatly appreciated the liberation

from administrative procedures and how easy it was to submit the required paperwork to receive the assistance and the grant.

Besides this, proper use of Fons 0-16 prevents the need to apply for one-off assistance for school materials, activities and excursions, and avoids children being excluded and discriminated against in relation to their peers. The professionals stated that they raise awareness among families, and make it clear that this money has to be used for these expenses. One very important issue, whether due to guidance from the professionals or at the families' own initiative, is that spending on school expenses is prioritised.

"I tell my children to write a letter to the Three Kings. In our house the Kings are coming in August this year. Usually we buy what they need and also let them go and choose something they like, so they feel more like children. When it arrives we all go shopping [laughs]. It's party-time [laughs]". Adam, father of Artur (14 years old and autistic), Adrian (12), Alba (8), Asier and Anita (2)

Outside school, mothers and fathers expressed concern about the risk of their children easily falling into cycles and environments of marginalisation and drug addiction. On this issue they are given strategies to reduce the risk by paying attention to their social surroundings and seeking out safe environments and activities related to sport or music as positive and creative ways for children to spend their free time. Although Fons does not directly cover these activities, and many are free or subsidised, it plays an important role in the material and emotional stability of the home due to the normalising potential it offers; the adults highlighted the fact that the money meant their children could have the right clothes and equipment for the activities, which is particularly important for ensuring children feel equal to their peers.

"The fridge is full, and school meals are taken care of. My children feel the same as the others." Monica, mother of Kim (14), Kira (8) and Karim (6)

Another important aspect of normalisation are the changes in how products that the family needs are accessed and the move from donation to consumption through normalised and normalising channels. This means reducing or stepping out of the cycles of charity or social care. Mothers and fathers stated that Fons 0-16 allows them to stop going to church to get food from the food bank, or to cease getting their clothes second hand from charities such as Càritas.

"For me, the most important thing is that I don't have to go to the church to ask for food every fortnight, because I used to go to church every fortnight to ask for food! I did that for two years. Do you know what it's like queuing there with your trolley? You have to go two hours early because there are long lines of trolleys, and I sometimes took my daughter, I had to. For me that's been just the best!" Aine, mother of Lila (9 years old)

3.3. Empowering families to act as families: increased skills to manage domestic finances

One aspect to highlight is the ability to plan and strategise how "the card", as they call it, is managed. The data indicates that families have a clear economic strategy, and that Fons 0-16 is key to fulfilling it. The professionals reported the same by stating that Fons 0-16 empowers families to independently manage and make decisions about their consumption despite insecure family finances.

"I do a large food shop, I freeze meat, I freeze fish, I freeze everything, you know? Then that's all taken care of. The next month I only have to buy fruit, vegetables and so I spend less on food. I spend money on shoes and glasses. That's OK. If I spend 200, then the next month I spent 125 and keep the rest for September to pay the enrolment fee. See what I mean? I'm always budgeting and keeping a bit back." Tanit, mother of Zoe (9 years old)

Social services professionals also see this as a valuable opportunity for parents to take responsibility for their own domestic affairs and to start by recognising their abilities in tasks involved in managing the family finances relating to their children. Both families and professionals agree that Fons 0-16 enables smaller separate one-off benefits and the paperwork they incur to cease by not only simplifying the procedures but also creating more opportunities for financial planning.

That said, while some professionals defend the importance of complete freedom to self-manage the benefit with no interference, to trust and not judge the family's spending criteria, others question the fact that receiving Fons 0-16 is not conditional on any work programme being agreed with the family, as they believe this makes it difficult to work towards objectives that impact the lives of children and adolescents and that, in some cases, more could be done to improve how the family's income is managed. In any case, informants stated they were only aware of the money being misused due to lack of supervision in exceptional cases.

"I know some people who don't use it properly, but that always happens. Most people are like me and do what we all do, buy food, clothes and pay for school." Monica, mother of Ben (12), Sara (9) and Pablo (6)

This aside, all the mothers and fathers interviewed made it clear they wanted to improve the lives of their family and help their children progress.

"We don't earn much working part time and I'm broke anyway. I have to ask for housing benefit anyway. I have to ask for benefits all the time anyway. I thought 'I've got to do something to stop this', because I don't want to be like this for seven years, earning this much, asking for benefits, I really don't want that. I can't go on like this. I mean, I want to get on with my life and move forward, you know?." Tanit, mother of Zoe (9 years old)

3.4. Uncertainties and limitations of Fons 0-16

One question that has arisen is whether Fons benefits the entire family unit or only the children and adolescents. Some professionals see it as an issue that, despite the intended recipients of the benefit being the children, there is no ability to restrict how it is used. The mothers and fathers, on the other hand, believe that if the family is okay then it does not need to go exclusively towards the children, although they may continue to be the main beneficiaries. Moreover, the informants claim that they prioritise the children, that they need different things at different ages, but that, at the end of the day, the household finances are shared.

"If we are okay at home, then my son is okay, and they need different things, you know? The 8 year old asks for different things to the 14 year old." Monica, mother of Ben (12), Sara (9) and Pablo (6)

The professionals and the families all experience uncertainty surrounding the dates and time-scale of the call and the awarding of the benefit. Mothers and fathers expressed anxiety as they cannot organise their time and are obliged to live "day-to-day" and find alternative solutions to their needs and emergencies. The limited time-scale and lack of continuity have given rise to the suggestion of 12-month payments that can be requested throughout the year. The speed of the administrative processes has an impact on domestic finances and families usually wait for the money to arrive before buying everything for the school year. In contrast, however, the observation, inclusive engagement and interviews all proved how easy it is to apply for the benefit, and highlighted the professionals' involvement in making it accessible and easy.

Finally, mothers and fathers tabled several suggestions for improving the scheme relating to certain criteria to access Fons 0-16. These were extending it to children up to 18 years of age and including health issues and medicines for children with specific needs not covered by the health portfolio.

“Between 16 and 18 is when children have the highest expenses, particularly if they continue in secondary education.” Fatima, a single mother with four children aged 18, 12, 6 and 3 years old (the youngest has diabetes)⁷

3.5. Benefits and dignity: a shift in perspective from charity to a right

Whilst some professionals have voiced their doubts in this regard, many believe that Fons 0-16 is a step away from a charitable and welfare-based perspective of separate one-off benefits (for glasses, school materials, etc.) towards a right to receive financial support in circumstances when household income is insufficient to ensure the needs of children and adolescents are met. The families interviewed have also internalised this view and this was reflected in what they said.

“I didn't find Fons, Fons found me. My social worker was the one who suggested it. There are lists of people at risk, and I got a letter sent to my house.” Aine, mother of Lila (9 years old)

In addition to the accounts given, it should also be noted that ethnographic observations can provide insight into important details that cannot be captured by verbal expression. When meetings took place in houses, they appeared clean and tidy, mothers and fathers were groomed and well-presented with carefully chosen clothes, not to impress the interviewer but rather to appear “as normal as possible”. Their dignity as people and that of their surroundings and their accounts contradict the imagined social notions of what would be “expected” and positions them far from a performativization of poverty.

In the next stage of the research we will verify and go deeper into the analysis and comprehension of the different subjective impacts of Fons 0-16 by including the essential voices of the children and adolescents. It is very probable that some of the ideas presented will be reinforced, others qualified and new ideas may appear. In all likelihood we will once again witness what has clearly emerged from the field work to date: dignity.

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⁷All the names in the testimonials have been changed.

