Children and International Development - Understanding Childhood

Introduction
The experiences of children are very diverse, but they have received little attention from academia and policy makers. In this essay the multidimensional nature of childhood is highlighted. Furthermore, attention is paid to the culturally-specific ways in which children are valued by society. Finally, reference is made to the implications of the notion of children's rights within the scope of childhood studies and international development objectives.

1. Childhood as a construct

1.1 Childhood is "socially constructed". What does this mean?
Each part of the world is characterised by certain socio-economic characteristics, which are a result of complex processes resulting in the amalgamation of a solid local culture. The New Social Studies on Childhood suggest that childhood is not a static term, but socially constructed, so "particular conceptualisations of childhood need to be understood in relation to the social conditions that gave rise to them" (Ansell, 2005, 10).

There are marked differences between various societies and historical periods, but even within a single society the term "childhood" may not be used uniformly amongst various social classes, ethnic groups and genders (Ansell, 2005). It is thus no surprise that in some societies children work and are treated as adults who contribute to their families' survival within the framework of the absence of any form of a welfare state. Nor is it unexpected that in certain societies girls lose the characterisation "child" earlier than boys, being seen as mature enough to form their own household through early marriage.

However, looking at children in specific contexts is by itself not sufficient (James et al., 1998). Attention must be paid both to the interconnectedness between the Global and the Local, by distinguishing between distal and proximal representations of childhood, and to the impact global processes have on local contexts. These ideas are well illustrated by the notion of "global child".
1.2 The notion of "global child" and its implications for children in the Global South

According to Talcott Parson's structural functionalist world view, children passively receive and reproduce the culture of the society in which they grow up. Today, however, in the framework of globalization – the continuing process of economic, cultural, political and social integration – children are exposed to previously unknown images and role models. Global child refers to a universal childhood model that aims to promote optimal child development on the basis of Western-like ideals. Western children are presented as apolitical and as light-hearted beings enjoying a care-free phase of their lives. Third World children, on the other hand, are presented as dysfunctional (Ansell, 2005).

Local children try to become "better" by adopting Western lifestyles and gradually becoming alienated from their local culture. However, poverty and physical distance present insurmountable barriers to fully adopting the global child model. The values that this model stands for are not applicable within a Third World context because other issues are actually still unresolved, such as striving to survive, which the global child model assumes is taken care of. In short, Third World children strive to reach a point which is utopian and unrealistic in their local context. This element brings us to an important aspect of childhood, namely its diversity among different cultural contexts.

2. Diversity of childhood

2.1 Importance of the notion of diversity in childhood studies

Diversity may refer to different experiences of children, such as self-conceptions and identities, health and well-being, expectations and aspirations, and opportunities and choices. The notion of diversity stresses the fallacy of taking Western childhood as the normative basis, because children are active agents in the production of local cultures, not passive receptors. Consequently, the notion of diversity is crucial to the process of examining children's role in international development. It then becomes clear that one-size-fits-all development policies imposed from above largely ignore the locally specific role of children. Rather, the systemic factors that determine the experiences of children at a local level must be addressed (Bunting, 2005).

Examining the implications of the diversity of childhood has the potential to increase the importance of childhood studies in the academic and political arenas, something that is currently not the case. By looking at diversity, children's studies become capable of developing a theoretical tool that can help devise a development approach which can "connect better with the realities of local contexts on the one hand, and is more grounded in social and
political analysis on the other hand” (White, 2007, 511). It should be born in mind, however, that legal changes will only take place if close attention and respect are shown for cultural beliefs and practices of local people (Ansell, 2005, 34). Through the above process I believe that childhood studies can become an important feedback-providing actor, contributing to the shaping of appropriate development policies characterized by flexibility and responsiveness to local contexts that will truly benefit the ones in need.

2.2 Some relevant historical changes and cultural differences regarding the location and value of children in different socio-cultural contexts

The way we look at the interaction between adults and children changes over time and in social space (Bunting, 2005, 21). In many contexts intergenerational contracts become an integral part of family relations. Such contracts imply specific understandings concerning the roles and responsibilities of family members, with stress on male gender, and are culturally determined (Ansell, 2005, 64). In India for instance, girls are subject to more control than boys. Other cultures, such as the Puerto Rican and Moroccan, emphasize the dependence of children on their parents, regardless of their gender. It all comes down to building strong ties between parents and children through these intergenerational contracts so that the family's continuation is ensured through children paying back their moral "debt" (Nieuwenhuys, 2005). This approach is common in societies with limited state provisions; however the phenomenon does not manifest itself uniformly. In not all cases is there a differentiation between child and adult family members. For instance, in rural Africa and Latin America children at a very early age are active agents in ensuring the household's survival, thus carrying the same rights and responsibilities as the adult members (Ansell, 2005, 66).

The above examples are diametrically opposed to Western experiences, where the Apollonian views are largely prevalent (Ansell, 2005, 12). However, making an absolute distinction between developed and developing world is not prudent, since the location and value of children in society is not only place specific, but also time specific. Even in Western Europe child labour, thus the treatment of children as adults, was common up until the 19th century (Cunningham, 2001).

In the wake of the evolution of the role of children, one may wonder what the future holds for them. I see that Western-based globalizing processes, manifested in the form of increased migration and urbanization among others, have the potential to alter how children are seen and valued in non-Western socio-cultural contexts, with unpredictable implications for children's identity formation processes.
2.3 The impact of different socio-cultural contexts on the formation of children's identity

Ansell (2005) has made a generic categorisation of socio-cultural contexts, the most important being family. The family type and size depend on the local socio-economic conditions and are associated with intergenerational contracts. Increased (moral) responsibilities may affect how children formulate and express their aspirations and goals, often tuning them to their parents' expectations.

It is also useful to examine the impact of peers and playing on children's identity formation. Peers function as a "social mirror" and are an integral part of one's socialisation. In given contexts, for example Africa, children have closer contact with peers than with families. Also in Western societies peers are seen as highly important for children's mental development. In Arab countries, however, they are of minor value. A similar role can be attributed to religious movements, although their impact becomes more visible as children enter the "youth" phase. Schooling also falls under the same context, constituting a primary means of education and socialisation.

Cultural globalization, brought about by global communications, may affect children's aspirations and goals, but may also determine available opportunities. It is widely accepted that the digital divide has rendered children in deprived areas more disadvantaged (though less "global"), whereas children with access to information can improve their human capital.

The processes which determine the formation of children's aspirations, goals, expectations and opportunities result in the development of certain views about life. Children interpret these views in unique ways, based on their background, and the views become crystallised in children's consciences. They eventually lead to the formation of a unique identity. How this identity can produce tangible outcomes is largely determined by the rights that are accorded to children.

3. Children's rights

3.1 The debate between Cultural Relativists and Universalists

Cultural Relativists advocate that practices can only be understood and valued within the culture in which they take place. Universalists, on the other hand, believe in the existence of universal values and that the same rights should apply everywhere. These two views are important in the context of the Convention for the Rights of the Child (CRC). This convention aims to address the issue of (the lack of) children's rights. It adopts a middle solution, a
compromise between the liberationist view, which emphasizes children's agency, and the caretaker view, which presents children as unable to act in their own interests.

Ansell (2005, 228) proposes that "it should not be assumed that autonomy is a precondition for an individual's exercise of rights". In the same sense, the usage of age as a childhood indicator can be highly problematic since ideas differ per cultural setting, as it was demonstrated before. Cultural relativists, who belong to the camp of the New Social Studies of Childhood, base their critique of the CRC on its over-generalising Western-influenced tendency.

The Universalists seem to be largely represented by powerful actors, such as governments and international organisations. They advocate that universally binding measures may help raise global awareness that children have special needs and that it is time for them to be seen as subjects rather than objects. Universalists strive for global recognition of certain rights. An indirect effect of this debate is that more, potentially fruitful, discussions can be generated.

3.2 A personal view on the debate

The debate involves two diametrically opposed views aimed at improving the lives of the children of the world. Of course even the notion of "improvement" is subjective and closely associated with the ideals of each view. The fact is that in local contexts, such as Bangladesh, children's rights are interpreted differently by external representatives of the "global community" than by locals themselves (White, 2007). This leads to externally designed and delivered proposed solutions, which may not take other contextual and practical factors, such as the household's survival, into account.

I believe that the discussion should not be about which of the two views is superior. It is clear that a global consensus is difficult to reach, but relying completely on local ideas may also be unsuitable. Perhaps employing a multidimensional approach which will encompass elements of local traditions coupled with findings stemming from interdisciplinary research may be the answer to efficiently addressing children's rights issues at a higher level. This is an ongoing process where new concerns may arise, so continuous research is needed.
4. Concluding remarks

It is time that children’s issues occupied a more prominent role within academia and development policies. Realising that local realities are not static, but rather dynamic, is a first step towards a better utilisation of development funds and human resources. Children's environment will always play a pivotal role in shaping their very being, so its influence should not be ignored. It has been demonstrated that being consumed in debates about what is the universally perfect solution is meaningless. Rather, a more integrated interdisciplinary approach has the potential to offer real solutions, provided that each of the involved parties puts self-interest aside and works towards unconditionally improving the lives of less fortunate children. Ultimately, one should never forget that the children of today are the agents of change for tomorrow, so what is done for them now really matters.

5. Literature


