

This is the final pre-publication version of an article submitted to [Sociology](#).

Published details:

Morrow, Virginia and Kirrily Pells (2012) “ [Integrating Children’s Human Rights and Child Poverty Debates: Examples from *Young Lives* in Ethiopia and India](#)”, *Sociology* 46: 906-920.

DOI: 10.1177/0038038512451532

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Integrating children’s human rights and child poverty debates: examples from *Young Lives* in Ethiopia and India

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Abstract:

*There are few attempts to link human rights discourses and child poverty debates, though the field is expanding. Within sociology, both the study of rights and of childhood are marginal. This paper utilises a sociological approach to bridge rights and poverty debates in relation to children and explore why there are barriers to implementing children’s rights in specific instances. Drawing on *Young Lives* research, a longitudinal study of children growing up in poverty, the paper explores how discourses of children’s rights play out in local contexts and how a narrowly legal perspective fails to engage with children’s experiences of poverty. The paper concludes by proposing that a broader, sociological approach to rights as not only rules, but also as structures, relationships and processes (Galant and Parlevliet, 2005) can better engage with the causes and consequences of poverty, while also developing locally relevant responses.*

Key words: child poverty - children’s human rights – children’s work - Ethiopia – India – orphanhood.

BACKGROUND

Where after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. (Eleanor Roosevelt, remarks at the United Nations, March 27, 1953)¹

An initial consideration of human rights and everyday life may appear abstract. A fundamental flaw of human rights, according to critics, is the failure to fulfil Eleanor Roosevelt's proposition that rights must gain relevance and legitimacy at the local level as the basis for achieving acceptance (Mohan and Holland, 2001). However, this can be attributed to the prevalence of a 'legal reflex' within human rights, namely that 'the automatic and unthinking resort to the law in the belief that it is the most effective and perhaps the only form of protection and remedy' (Gready and Ensor, 2005: 13). Gearty (2011: 243) argues for human rights 'as an idea, a way of asserting dignity', and asks '...how can we resist the lawyers plundering of human rights, their transformation of it from a source of emancipatory power into an arid mechanism for the resolution of disputes'? One way is to take a sociological approach to rights, both viewing rights as socially constructed (Miller, 2010) as well as paying greater attention to local contexts, meanings, power and agency (Short, 2009).

However, as Hynes et al. (2010) note, the few sociologists who have engaged with human rights are sceptical, partly for historical reasons linked to Marx's view of human rights as rooted in ownership of property and as 'merely a facade' to mask fundamental inequalities (Turner, 1993: 492). Twenty years ago, Turner (1993: 490) discussed the silence about rights in sociology: 'human rights debates and legislation are major features of the socio-political processes and institutions of modern societies, but sociology apparently possesses no contemporary theory of rights'. He suggested that there is 'no necessary reason why rights as such should be understood exclusively from an individualist perspective' (Turner, 1993: 492). Turner proposed an analysis of human rights grounded in concepts of human frailty, in the precariousness of social institutions, and in a theory of moral sympathy, to match the 'increasingly risky nature of social life' (Turner, 1993: 508). Following Turner, Woodiwiss (2005: 7) suggests that 'a sociological approach refuses to separate rights from social life as a whole and issues of power in particular'. We argue that sociological approaches, focussing on

the processes, practices, and structures of everyday life, can explain why there are political and economic as well as social and cultural barriers to implementing international conventions.

In relation to children, scepticism about rights is marked, and despite some advances within the ‘new’ sociology of childhood, the sociological study of children and childhood (like that of human rights) is marginal, and remains dominated by developmental theory (Mayall, 2000). While it is increasingly acknowledged within development and social policy circles that poverty has fundamental implications for human rights, and vice versa, debates about human rights, poverty and inequality have not tended to include considerations of childhood (Dean, 2007; Balakrishnan and Elson, 2008; Lister, 2004; Townsend, 2009). The links between children’s human rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989, henceforth CRC) and child poverty are beginning to be drawn for Europe (Redmond, 2008; Vandenhoe et al., 2010). We argue that a sociological approach can bridge rights and child poverty discourses. The paper begins by discussing children’s rights, and the CRC. It then examines why rights and poverty debates are frequently isolated. The third section draws on two case studies from Young Lives, an international study of childhood poverty. We explore how discourses of children’s rights play out in local contexts and how a legal perspective risks failing to engage with the roots of children’s difficulties, namely poverty. Our examples suggest that a nuanced understanding is required to guard against the misapplication of rights, and to retain the spirit of the CRC as a set of norms that are intended to be flexibly interpreted and put into practice locally. The paper concludes by proposing that a broader, sociological approach to rights as not only rules, but also as structures, relationships and processes (Galant and Parlevliet, 2005) can better engage with the causes and effects of poverty.

Children’s human rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The CRC is the most widely ratified UN Convention, though it is often viewed critically. A general cultural-relativist argument suggests that human rights as formulated in UN Conventions are Western constructions, imposed on developing countries by powerful institutions (Mohan and Holland, 2001). These arguments have been critiqued. Cowan et al. (2001: 3) suggest that shifting attention ‘from a formulation which *opposes* culture and

human rights to one in which the pursuit of human rights is approached as itself *a cultural process* which impinges on human subjects and subjectivities in multiple and contradictory ways’ might help to ‘transcend certain impasses and raise new kinds of questions’ (emphasis in original; see also Sen, 1999; Woodiwiss, 2005).

Secondly, there is a tendency to interpret the CRC as promoting a Western model of childhood. Burman (2008: 47) notes that

there are certainly residues of the child of the Western imaginary structured within international child rights policies and legislation. The common slogans of ‘stolen childhood’ ... privilege the model of childhood with the Western world.

This suggests that claims about the CRC as ‘Western’ are not without foundation, in practice they rest less on how rights are conceptualised, but rather how rights are applied. On the other hand, Burman (2008: 54) points out that professionals who draw on children’s rights discourses ‘are not necessarily uncritical subscribers to it, ... [and] in their practice may challenge the historical and cultural abstraction of childhood by supporting community and community-defined development’. The preamble of the CRC emphasises ‘taking due account of traditions and cultural values’, as does Article 30 (relating to ethnic minorities). However, there is a tendency to produce sentimental rhetoric without thought about what it means for ways of working and improving children’s lives (Cheney, 2007). Burman (2012) notes that rights language has even been co-opted by marketers, with (for example) washing powder advertisements invoking five ‘rights’ for children – to play, explore, create, imagine, experiment.

Much criticism fails to locate the CRC within an understanding of human rights, and UN history and structures (problematic though these may be). As Tobin (2011: 62) argues ‘there is always a risk that human rights and indeed children’s rights can be used to impose agenda and values that are inappropriate and ineffective in responding to the cultural needs of children’. This includes the separation of children’s rights from human rights, encapsulated in the widely-used phrase ‘child rights’, and a tendency to generate tautological slogans, such as ‘the right to a childhood’ (UNICEF, 2010). Cantwell, who was involved in drafting the CRC, notes ‘a problem has gradually been surfacing: too often, these rights (in the CRC) are not looked on as children’s inalienable *human* rights but simply as ... *children’s* rights’ (Cantwell, 2011: 42, emphasis in original). He suggests that this separation is ‘exactly the opposite of what was intended when the CRC was being drawn up’ (Cantwell, 2011: 57). A

close reading of the history and development of the CRC is required, as well as careful attention to the precise text², and the General Comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child which enable the interpretation of the CRC in practice.

The CRC does not contain specific rights relating to poverty and does not define the term. As others have noted (see Redmond, 2008; Jones, 2005), the CRC outlines rights in relation to children's well-being that *relate to* poverty and deprivation, as well as encompassing the right to life, survival and development as a core underlying principle. Moreover, taking a sociological approach, as opposed to a legalistic reading, offers a means of engaging with poverty debates by building on the 'implied principles' of 'human dignity, interdependence and indivisibility of human rights, cultural sensitivity and the complementary principles of due deference' (Invernizzi and Williams, 2011: 7). The various articles of the CRC, taken together with these principles, can form the basis for practical measures and enable flexibility to engage with local contexts. However, in practice, approaches to tackling child poverty have rarely engaged with rights.

Child poverty

The study of (child) poverty has been dominated by classical economists and social policy specialists mainly working within human capital frameworks. Economists dominate definitions and measurement of poverty, and policy making. The global economic crisis and the failure of economic growth to alleviate poverty has led to reflection amongst economists (Morrow, 2012). For example, Atkinson (2011) suggests that mainstream economics has lost sight of its historical roots as essentially a 'moral' subject focused on welfare. Shiller and Shiller (2011) point out that economics has become increasingly technical and complex, and less focussed on 'how the world works', and suggest that knowledge from disciplines such as history, sociology and psychology could encourage 'broad-spectrum thinking, driven by the broad moral purposes of improving human welfare' (Shiller and Shiller, 2011: 175). It is not a big leap to suggest that questions of welfare are related to moral questions of human rights and dignity.

For much of the 2000s, discussions about child poverty and children's rights seldom connected (Alston, 2005). So, for example, during the run-up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG1 aims to halve extreme poverty and hunger) human rights frameworks were not

invoked (Townsend, 2009: 29). When child poverty specialists cite the CRC, they do so in a partial way, in contradiction to the spirit of human rights conventions, that is, rights as indivisible and interdependent. For example, Gordon et al. (2003: 29) in their much-quoted work on child poverty select isolated articles, focusing on provision rights, and other rights are not considered.

In child poverty debates, children are subsumed under the umbrella of ‘family’, usually narrowly defined as parents, and measures are based on parents’ income or expenditure, with consequent recommendations that parental income through employment is the solution to children escaping persistent poverty. Within this paradigm, ‘children are implicitly treated as ‘objects’ and ‘products’ of the system’ (Alderson, 2008: 81). World Bank policies typify this view through the globalisation of interventions based on human capital assumptions, that is, formal qualifications combined with economic growth will lift children out of poverty (Penn, 2002). The ‘global model of childhood’ (often attributed to CRC but equally linked with the MDGs, and Education for All agenda), as a period spent in formal schooling, is increasingly invoked by parents and children as well as NGOs and governments around the world.

Instead, attention needs to be paid to how economic deprivation affects children directly, and to focus on political and economic processes, and the structures that create, or fail to reduce, poverty. The consequences of poverty are lived, embodied and experienced by children in subtle or acute ways. Townsend (2009: 153) suggested ‘using human rights as a methodology to pin down major patterns of development and assess policy’, proposing that social science ‘has a considerable role to play in coordinating the collection and analysis of such... evidence and evaluating policy impact’ (Townsend, 2009: 154).

The language of rights ... changes the analysis of world conditions and the discussion of responsible policies. It shifts the focus of debate from the personal failures of the ‘poor’ to the failures to resolve poverty of macro-economic structures and policies of nation states and international bodies.... child poverty cannot then be considered as a parental problem or a local community problem (Townsend, 2009: 155).

In the case studies that follow, we demonstrate how sociological approaches may provide insight into childhood poverty, and link children’s experiences to their rights.

Young Lives: researching children’s everyday realities

We draw on Young Lives, a study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in four countries – Ethiopia, Peru, India (Andhra Pradesh) and Vietnam – over 15 years, 2002-

2017. Young Lives aims to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and the role of policies in improving children's life chances. It collects longitudinal data from two cohorts of children in each country: 2,000 children born in 2000–1 and 1,000 children born in 1994–5. Young Lives takes a holistic view of children's lives, engaging with children to explore their experiences of poverty. Qualitative research complements and extends survey data, enabling an analysis of processes that help to explain the patterns found in statistical trends³. Fieldwork is conducted by local research teams, fluent in local languages. A range of qualitative research methods are used, including one-to-one interviews, group discussions and creative activities. Interviews are conducted in homes, fields, or in village community premises, and are voice recorded, transcribed, and translated. Interviews are structured around specific questions, and last from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Data are coded by themes, using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Analysis of Young Lives data produces findings that relate to questions of social justice and inequality, and thus implicitly for human rights. A rights perspective can add value by exploring some of the obstacles to children's daily lives, and to focus on the power relations that sustain and perpetuate poverty. Many findings are emerging that have implications for children's human rights, such as the effects of parental domestic violence on children's well-being, to patterns of inequality, discrimination, and the failure of economic growth to 'trickle down' to the poorest sections of societies (Galab, et al. 2011; Woldehanna, 2011; see also Drèze and Sen, 2011). A sub-study has explored the challenges of translating research into practice in areas related to risks, vulnerability and resilience for children in poverty. In Andhra Pradesh, India, this focused on children's work, and in Ethiopia on orphans and vulnerable children. These priorities were selected following in-country consultations. These two complex issues in differing socio-political contexts merit a much fuller analysis than we can provide here, and we present a summary of some of the findings. Drawing on this sub-study, we adopt a sociological approach to explore how far policies for children are shaped by rights principles and how these engage, or fail to engage, with the realities of children's daily lives.

India: beyond a legalistic approach to children's work

Child labour is a contested topic, and definitions are not straightforward (Bourdillon et al., 2010). The ILO (International Labour Organisation) defines child labour by age, likelihood of

harm, working relationships such as slavery, trafficking. However, most work undertaken by children falls outside these categories, and broader sociological definitions include domestic chores and unpaid family labour (Morrow and Vennam, 2012). In India, large numbers of children work, particularly in agriculture. A dominant discourse insists that child labour should be eliminated, while a small group of working children's movements argue that children have the right to dignity at work (Liebel, 2004). The Government of India ratified the CRC in 1992, and heartily endorses 'child rights', though tends to generate rhetoric. A National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) was established in 2007 as a statutory body under the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005. The NCPCR aims to protect, promote and defend 'child rights' in India, with an emphasis on child protection. India has not ratified the two ILO⁴ conventions on child labour, Convention 138, and Convention 182, though the Constitution of India contains Articles that are concerned with child labour⁵. National legislation is not effective in many circumstances. As Akerkar (2005: 144) notes, the Constitution provides a framework of enforcing human rights but in reality 'vast sections of the Indian population continue to be discriminated against', and while progressive legislation is being introduced, progress is slow.

In relation to children and work, there is a rapidly developing policy environment, including the Right to Education Act (2009) making education compulsory to age 14, campaigns to include agricultural work as 'hazardous child labour', and initiatives to eliminate child labour. These latter initiatives are especially problematic as they evoke an unspecified, idealised normative view of 'childhood' – that is, that children should be in school, playing, carefree and sheltered, not at work - and thus misapply the language of rights. Children's 'right to a childhood' is frequently invoked (UNICEF spokesperson cited in MVF 2004). This enables criticism of the CRC as Western and essentialising, and begs the question of what childhood is in the first place. In contrast, Young Lives research demonstrates that there are powerful norms relating to children's roles, that need to be interpreted carefully in attempts to 'eliminate' harmful work (Morrow and Vennam, 2009).

Analysis of Young Lives survey data suggests a decline in children working for pay at age 8 between 2002 (6%) and 2009 (3%). But by the time they reach secondary school age, children from poorer households work at home and on farms, especially during the peak agricultural seasons (Galab et al., 2011). This differs according location, but children manage school, home and work in complex ways. While children do not use the language of rights,

they recognise the difficulties caused by working, as well as the importance of their work. In research in 2011 with 42 young people aged 15-16 years in two rural communities (Morrow and Vennam, 2012) we investigated children's understandings of 'risks' at work, as well as their experiences and strategies for trying to manage risks. They described numerous risks, and complained about the heavy drudgery of agricultural work, and were well aware of the difficulties they faced in combining school and work, the risk to their futures of working, and the physical harms to their bodies.

Children discussed what might happen if they were prohibited from working. Their responses can be grouped into several themes, including survival, earning money, enhancing marriage prospects, having something to do, a source of pride, having fun, and a way of learning skills for the future. But fundamentally, being prevented from working would mean that they would have no food: as one girl said, 'We will not have rice, vegetables, and if we fall sick, they will not be able to take care of us. In every way, they face problems.' A boy commented

I cannot imagine a life without working. Work means everything to me. Unless I work, we cannot run our house. We need to buy food to run our home... and I have to work to raise money to buy all these.

Earning money not only helps to pay off family debts but enables families to seek further credit. Money enables children to support other family members, and is fundamental to relationships with others in the community, and to children's reputations. Work is part of being a 'good' child. One boy recounted how his mother had been told by others in the community

"Look, you are a blessed one. You are being looked after by your son and there is no need for you to work. He is not only earning but also taking care of you". I felt very happy. I want to get a good name, still want to work hard and do better things.

Work also teaches children skills that are useful. As one girl said, 'when we grow up, we can do the work...', and a boy commented, 'since we have no education, this is useful'. On the whole, children disliked agricultural work, and hoped to move out of it altogether. They felt that agriculture is not viable, it was not profitable because of crop diseases, and it involves hard work in the hot sun (Morrow and Vennam, 2012).

Children's work needs to be seen in the context of local understandings of childhood, expectations about children's activities, and the contributions that children make to their

families. The widespread assumption in policy campaigning is that children are ‘forced’ to work by their parents, but the picture is more complicated, and a number of factors, including poverty, gender, caste, ethnicity, parental ill-health, and concerns whether formal school qualifications will give children the skills they need to earn a living in the future intersect to explain why children work (Morrow and Vennam, 2009).

Although children are not prohibited from working within the CRC, much NGO material on child labour cites only Article 32 (right to be protected from economic exploitation and harmful work). Bissell (2005: 68) suggests that ‘wrongly interpreted and cited in isolation of each other, the articles of the convention run the risk of hurting rather than helping children’. There are copious examples where interventions that were intended to help children (for example, banning child labour in factories) have led to worse outcomes for children (Bourdillon et al., 2010). Bourdillon et al. (2010: 208) suggest that ‘damaging effects may be avoided if the application of rights is sensitive to local values and to local resources, both of which are likely to affect priorities for intervention. The sensitivity can only come through attention to the views of the people concerned’.

A balanced approach attempts to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of work from children’s and their families’ perspectives (Bourdillon et al., 2010). This view sees children as social agents who have capabilities and responsibilities, rather than as passive victims, because it takes into account the effects of labour on children’s well-being and social development, and also balances these with the advantages of work from children’s and their families’ perspectives. The ‘elimination’ of child labour would require a re-conceptualisation of local understandings of childhood, as well as a disruption of intergenerational relations. Poverty intersects with other factors in encouraging children’s work in agriculture, and this leads to a contradiction between the value children place on their work, and the fact working is profoundly problematic, because their health and formal education is compromised (Morrow and Vennam, 2009). Rights talk in relation to the right to education may be misapplied – as it risks ignoring the importance of a holistic approach, fails to engage with structures and processes of poverty, and disrupts local conceptualisations of childhood and family relations, all of which the CRC can be interpreted as opposing.

Ethiopia – problematising the categorisation of children

Orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) have been the focus of child protection policy making across sub-Saharan Africa and Ethiopia is no exception. There are an estimated 5.4 million orphans⁶ in Ethiopia as a result of the death of one or both parents and by age 12 one in five Young Lives children were orphaned (Crivello and Chuta, 2012; Pells, 2011; see Woldehanna, et al. (2011) for context and poverty trends in Ethiopia). The sub-study focused on OVC, to explore assumptions in relation to policy intervention with specific categories of children and orphans in particular. Policies are driven by key international agencies and donors who have shaped the definitions, priorities and solutions. NGO-dominated discourse about OVC constructs children as vulnerable and in need of protection, and this may be less threatening than talking about rights, social justice, entitlements, and economic and structural factors. Yet this approach could be fruitful. Despite ratifying the CRC in 1991 and the African Charter for the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 2002, in the run-up to the Presidential election in 2009, the Government of Ethiopia ruled that charities ‘receiving more than 10% of [their] funding from abroad’ (that is, most NGOs) are prohibited by law under the Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies 2009 from engaging in activities related to: ‘the advancement of human and democratic rights... [including] the promotion of children’s rights...’ (see Elone, 2010). This was partly a reaction to the elections in 2005, when some NGOs were seen to be involved in oppositional politics. The government has set up an organisation to register charities, though there is a lack of guidance, so it is not clear how the legislation will be interpreted.

In a situation like this, the language of rights does not need to be explicitly used for policies to be implicitly rights-based in attempts to advance the interests of children and others. However, somewhat contradictorily, the Ethiopian government is currently drafting a National Child Policy which is peppered with rights language, in line with the Constitution of the Ethiopia Federal Democratic Republic, Article 36 (1995)⁷ and the CRC, as well as other discourses. The draft National Child Policy mentions counselling not only for ‘vulnerable children’ (Para 3.6) but also for parents experiencing ‘marital problems’ (Para 3.2). The CRC does mention ‘counselling’, but only within a list of potential interventions for juvenile offenders and does not include therapeutic interventions for parents. This can be understood as an example of a misapplication of rights, because it categorises certain children as vulnerable, and over-emphasises psychosocial interventions, rather being rooted in the spirit of the CRC as a whole (Pells, forthcoming).

The sub-study involved qualitative research conducted in 2010 with 26 children aged between 9 and 16 and explored sources of support available to children, to try to understand how children manage difficulties in their lives (Crivello and Chuta, 2012). The findings suggest that a focus on orphanhood can mask other factors that affect children directly, mostly related to poverty. For example, Denbel, a boy aged 15, living in Hawassa, the capital town of SNNPR (Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region) described how the family's situation had deteriorated when his father died, and how the rising cost of living presented difficulties:

My mother always says that she doesn't have the capacity to fulfil all our needs..... when my family couldn't provide me with necessities, I decided to work ... and earn money to get what I need. When I get 150 birr. [about £5.40], then I give 50-60 to my mother and I buy shoes and other necessities for myself with the remaining money.

Bereket, aged 16, lives in an overcrowded area in the centre of Addis Ababa. He is the youngest boy in his family and he lives with his grandmother, two brothers and a girl who is a relative. His mother died when he was six, and his father's whereabouts were unknown. Bereket's grandmother encouraged all of the children to work, so after school, Bereket worked washing cars and changing car tyres, earning between 20-200 birr. His earnings went towards his school tuition, clothes and food, but his grandmother refused to accept any money from him.

Rural children talked about crop failure, flooding and drought, parental ill-health and death, family separation. Poverty underlay many of their accounts. Thus, a girl growing up with both parents in a very poor family in a drought-prone village may be more vulnerable than a child who has lost both parents but who is living in a materially secure extended family in Addis Ababa (Pells, 2011).

Young Lives findings illustrate how national strategies often start with conceptions of vulnerability, which do not necessarily reflect the priorities of children's everyday lives. Being an orphan may not be what causes difficulty to children in their daily lives, but it may be one of several sources of vulnerability, and a broad understanding is needed of factors that affect children (Crivello and Chuta, 2012). As with our example from India, rights language is being used to prescribe a narrow range of solutions and does not engage with the structures and processes of poverty, or the complex web of relationships in which children live. Again, this undermines the spirit of the CRC.

Rights as rules, structures, relationships and processes

The case studies have illustrated three things – first, poverty is often the cause of children’s difficulties; second, there is a need for rights to engage with poverty; and third, a broad understanding is needed of how rights can and do function. A sociological approach to poverty and rights can identify intersections between structures and processes, but also requires clarity about conceptualising rights in diverse settings in the first place.

Galant and Parlevleit (2005) identify four ways in which rights operate – as rules, structures, relationships and processes, which reflects a sociological understanding of rights. Each can be discerned in the cases mentioned above. Briefly, **rights as rules** reflect common understandings as rights formally enshrined in international conventions, regional or domestic legislation. Both case studies demonstrate how viewing rights narrowly and rigidly associated with a specific solution is at odds with local realities. However, rights are broader than legal rules, the law is often not the only body of rules that operates in a given society, and there are many locally-generated rules (norms) that can inform rights. These social and cultural norms are not static, like legal codes, but are dynamic and can be drawn upon to reinterpret rights and to devise strategies for implementation, a two-way process leading to rights being claimed locally (see Engle Merry, 2006). Children from Working Children’s Movements use the language of rights to address their own priorities, so for example in India they claim the right to protection while working (Liebel, 1994, 2012). Other norms may operate locally, such as the expectation that children will contribute to the domestic economy, highlighting the interdependence of family members. If rights do not have meaning in the social, economic and culture contexts in which people are living, ‘they have little meaning anywhere’.

Rights as structures largely concern provision rights embodied in policies and legislation, such as education, health and the distribution of resources. This involves tackling the structural causes of poverty and asking questions about who has access to services and resources. Child labour campaigns, for example, often blame parents, and ignore political and economic explanations for children’s involvement in work. In the debates about OVC, the poverty of young people is often overlooked, and technical (individual) fixes like counselling are proposed. Understanding rights as structures also guards against single rights approaches, such as ‘the right to education’ or ‘the right to health’, without taking a systemic view that

identifies how different institutions do or do not work together. Instead, listening to children demonstrates that they are acutely aware of how their parents/caregivers struggle to provide for them, view poverty as the underlying cause of their difficulties and identify the complex intersections between poverty, education, work, health, and agency.

Rights as relationships moves beyond narrow legalistic interpretations to emphasise the ways in which children and young people are situated in webs of relationships, within their families, friendships, communities, regions and States at large. As the examples show, children emphasise their connectedness to others rather than their autonomy and separateness – that is, they see themselves relationally. This is evident in situations of poverty where children work as part of the family and where children have lost parents but moved into households of the extended family. These relationships may be complex and contradictory in rights terms. So children may be working long hours in poor conditions, but the wages children earn may be necessary for the survival of the household or in order to enable children (or their younger siblings) to buy school materials and so attend school. A sociological approach that refuses to separate rights from social life (as Woodiwiss suggests) would also refute a narrow focus on individual categories of children, such as ‘child labourers’ or OVC.

Finally, understanding **rights as processes** involves a focus on participation. Of the four general principles of the CRC, Article 12 is perhaps the most controversial. This has led to greater understanding of the possibilities and limitations of children’s participation (see, for example, Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2009). It is evident that children are effective, resourceful commentators, and the challenge is for adults to act upon what they hear. There is recognition that participation takes place within a framework of power dynamics that not only involve relationships between children, but also require an understanding of the context of adult’s participation (or lack of it, particularly in situations of deprivation). This is not to imply that the opportunities for children to realise their rights depends on their ‘innate’ strength but rather to suggest that adults need to recognise the constraints upon children’s agency that relate to their experiences of poverty.

The risk is that participatory approaches place a burden upon children to reflect upon their situations and propose solutions for what are essentially problems caused by politics and economics. Similar arguments have been made about adults’ participation in poverty research

(Cooke and Kothari, 2001). There are many examples where children's views of what matters do not fit with adult-driven agendas (Hart, 2007). Children do not see themselves as 'child labourers', undertaking 'hazardous work', as 'orphans' or 'vulnerable'. However, by focusing on process, attempts have been made to work alongside local cultures and traditions by involving, not excluding, adults and the wider community (Theis and O'Kane, 2005). Conceptualising rights as process may act as a bridge between theory and practice, by emphasising that rights principles should inform action as well as outcomes.

Therefore, thinking sociologically about rights enables rights to both engage with the broader structures, systems and processes that impact upon and interact with everyday life, while also developing locally relevant responses. Attention to context, in this case, the very differing political histories, systems, and understandings of childhood in Ethiopia and India, is vital. We suggest that a sociological approach to rights can facilitate better understanding of multiple interconnecting processes that operate to disadvantage children.

Conclusion

Globally, developing countries are modernising rapidly and unevenly, and a sociological analysis becomes more pertinent. Yet despite some progress, thinking about children, childhood and children's rights remains marginal in the face the relentless emphasis on what are ultimately human capital approaches based on 'outcomes' and realising children's potential as productive adults in an imagined perfect labour market. As our summaries from India and Ethiopia have shown, a sociological approach illuminates the structural processes that drive poverty, and emphasises the ways in which rights approaches can be narrowly or misapplied and so do not fit with children's realities. Instead, a sociological lens can be useful as an analytic tool to explain why it is difficult to realise rights in practice. A sociological approach could also help in developing contextually relevant responses that engage with the complexities of relationships and processes. Finally, a sociological approach to rights enables a focus on children and childhood in the present, not just the future, which is essential for attempts to break poverty cycles. It also respects children's dignity and worth, as social actors in their own right, not simply as means to ends.

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¹ The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, at <<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/abouteleanor/er-quotes/>> (accessed 27/07/11)

² The text is available online (UN 1989).

³ For information about methods and ethics, see www.younglives.org.uk

⁴ Tripartite UN organisation of governments, trades unions and employers that sets global labour standards, and campaigns for the abolition of child labour.

⁵ Government of India Constitution (1949) Articles 21a, Article 24, and Article 39e.

⁶ In NGO and development studies, an orphan is a child who has lost one parent, not both (hence maternal, paternal and double orphans).

⁷ Constitution of Ethiopia (1995) Article 36 Rights of Children.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Young Lives' children and families who participate in the research, and fieldwork teams, especially Uma Vennam at SPMVV, Tirupati, AP, India, and Yisak Tafere at Save the Children, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. We are also grateful to Helen Murray, Alula Pankhurst, Paul Dornan, and to the editors of the special issue, and four anonymous referees, for their helpful comments and contributions. Young Lives is funded by Department for International Development (DFID). The qualitative study was funded by the Oak Foundation. The views expressed here are not those of DFID, Oak Foundation, Young Lives, or the University of Oxford.

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