

The Futures of Children: the Challenges and Opportunities of Diversity¹

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Childwatch International was proud and honored to be part of Norway's 100th Anniversary celebrations. It was particularly appropriate for us to be here because of Norway's deep commitment to children around the world. Moreover, the Norwegian government is the founder and longtime supporter of Childwatch International, a global network linking research institutes dedicated to improving the condition of children in 43 different countries.

People from over 80 countries discussed a wide variety of topics critical to the wellbeing of children in a changing world. Large scale change and transformation is not a new experience. The phenomenon of waves of settlement, conquest or trade opening up one culture to other cultures is as old as the history of human settlements. And those changes have always impacted the lives of children.

But the contemporary experience of globalization seems quantitatively different from changing relationships between communities and countries in the past. Our economic lives, for example, are increasingly interdependent as more markets become world markets. One result is that children who live in villages or even countries which are not major players in the growth industries of that globalized economy are denied many economic opportunities from birth.

But globalization has also brought improvements in the lives of children. We should celebrate the fact that more children have risen above poverty and that India and China

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are experiencing an explosion of economic growth. At the same time we should remember that income inequality between and within many countries is increasing and that the capacity of the have-nots to make it to the global economy diminishes as the price of entry gets higher in terms of education, skill levels and levels of capital investment.

The age-old tragedies of war, famine, and disease continue to wreck the lives of vast numbers of children. And poverty is not just about income. It is also, as one world religious leader said recently, about the stability of a domestic or an education environment, about access to unpolluted natural space, and, in a wonderful expression, familiarity with the practices and languages that offer access to human meaning.³

What have we to say to children who are marginalized: children who are placed outside the boundaries of regular society, and who, however long and hard they knock at the door, cannot get in? And what do we say to children who have more comfortable futures about those who do not? These and other questions will get discussed at our conference, but I would like to address one difficult question that profoundly affects children and that we very often ignore or conceal in a rhetoric of good feeling. That question is the continuing power of difference or diversity to delight and to annoy, to nourish our imaginations and to destroy our capacity to live together.

Most of our countries now recognize the cruelties that the powerful and the not so powerful commit on children and families who are different than themselves; cruelties based on such characteristics as skin color, ethnicity, religion or gender. In Brazil, for example, until recently we thought we were a shining example of the mixed race society. Now we know better and have been forced to confront the harsh relationship between skin color and life chances.

³ Rt. Rev. Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, "Christianity, Islam and the Challenge of Poverty", speech to the Bosniak Institute, Sarajevo, May, 2005, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches last accessed June 19, 2005.

But as we get better at noticing and attacking such intolerance, we can easily slip into a way of thinking that has its own dangers; a superficial celebration of diversity that blinds us to the real difficulty of facing differences that we do not understand and that threaten our most cherished beliefs.

What I want to suggest is that there is an enduring dialectical tension between celebrating the life-giving diversity that children from different backgrounds bring to our lives, and coping with differences that are extremely hard to accept.

The fourteenth century Sufi poet Hafiz celebrates diversity by rejoicing in the different music that different cities make all over the known world.

Every city is a dulcimer
That plays its chorus against
Our ears.⁴

In another poem Hafiz celebrates the emergence of song wherever there is life:

Wherever
God lays His glance
Life starts
Clapping.

The
Myriad
Creatures grab their instruments
And join the
Song.⁵

Wherever there are people in communities, not matter where they are, they express the joy of being alive in their own ways and add to a kaleidoscope of song.

⁴Hafiz, "Every City is a Dulcimer" in The Gift. Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master, trans. Daniel Ladinsky, New York: Arkana, Penguin Putman inc., p. 315.

⁵ Hafiz, "Life Starts Clapping", *ibid.* p. 85.

The contemporary anthropologist, Clifford Geertz takes the darker view of diversity and sees our fundamental and dangerously colliding differences as a reality we must face or suffer severe consequences. First, he insists our global village is not making us all alike:

*Everyone-Sikhs, Socialists, Positivists, the Irish-is not going to come around to a common opinions concerning what is decent and what is not, what is just and what is not, what is beautiful and what is not, what is reasonable and what is not: not soon, perhaps not ever.*⁶

Think of the ancient enemies in your part of the world and ask yourself if Geertz is right. But Geertz's vision is not just pessimistic. This is because he sees diversity and difference as the essence of being human. And this essential difference does not start in the next village, or the next region or even the next country. To quote Geertz again "Foreignness does not start at the water's edge, but at the skin's".⁷ The biggest difference that exists is between me or you and everyone else.

This realization gives us hope and a challenge. The promise is that if the fundamental difference is between one young child and the child next door, we can cope with that difference. The challenge is that if large differences lay just outside our front door, aren't we justified in concentrating on those challenges? But then we would throw up our hands in despair about the differences between a child growing up in Ruanda and one growing up in New Zealand.

Once again Geertz blasts our illusions:

Whatever once was possible, and whatever may now be longed for, the sovereignty of the familiar impoverishes everyone: to the degree that it has a future, ours is dark. It is not that we must love each other or die (or if that is the case-Blacks and Afrikaners, Arabs and Jews, Tamils and Singhalese-we are all I

⁶ Geertz, Clifford, Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p 73.

⁷ Geertz, 2000, p.76.

*think doomed). It is that we must know each other, and live with the knowledge, or end marooned in a Beckett world of colliding soliloquy.*⁸

Let me give you several examples of what we must know about our differences if we are to improve the lives of children.

I will start with the clash between young Muslim girls in Paris and the civic authorities. The girls' religious beliefs and their sacred texts teach them that to be modest they must wear headscarves to school. But the civil authorities want no display of religion in school. They are expressing the deeply held belief, a belief with roots in the European Enlightenment, that French schools which receive all their funds from the state should not promote any religion, and should be equally accessible to children of any or no faith. Some families caught in this and similar dilemmas in France and other countries react by sending their children to religious schools. But as they solve one problem, they create another by raising children who do not know their peers of other, or no, religions.

Or take an apparently unbridgeable class difference in my city of Rio de Janeiro. The children of my middle class neighborhood of Laranjeiras can go to our famous beaches during Carnival and have a wonderful time. The children of the slum community of Santa Marta just a hill away risk being carted off from the beaches literally in garbage trucks to "clean things up for the tourists". And after Carnival my neighbor's children go to private schools and the kids from Santa Marta who are lucky enough to end up in school go to inadequate public schools. And since the two groups of kids don't meet each other anywhere else, we breed another generation of discrimination and intolerance. Or to skip back to Europe, how do the quote "dirty, ugly and bad" gypsy kids of Portugal get a foot in the door of opportunity?

And these are differences within a single country. Consider the vast differences in life chances of children in different countries. The wealthy suburban teenager in the United

⁸ Geertz, 2000, p.84.

States lives in a different **universe** of economic opportunity than the Aids orphan in rural Kenya who has lost her mother, her father and her older brother to the epidemic.

So while we celebrate the diversity of children's gifts and experiences in our many countries, how do we confront the darker side of difference, the side that produces the deep and enduring difference in opportunity? I just have time to suggest four important steps we should take.

A first step is to continue to face up to the reality that inequalities among countries are getting worse and that the most devastated countries cannot pull themselves out of the peril they are in without enormous help from the rich countries. For example, Norway has \$US43,000 in per capita income, Brazil has \$3,000 and the Democratic Republic of the Congo \$100. One of our research and policy challenges is to discover what help really helps and what help hurts in reducing these inequalities.

A second step is to recognize that stark differences in children's lives also exist within each of our individual countries. We need to look at the income gaps, the wrongheaded policies, the indifference and hostility towards those children that remain on the margins of our societies just as much as we must look at how global differences in wealth and opportunity curtail the dreams of young people. National data such as those I have just quoted are a wake-up call in their own right. But they conceal huge within country differences that we must also reduce. In Brazil the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution shares 2.5 percent of the total national income. In the Czech Republic that bottom 20 percent has 14 percent of the total national income, and in India that group has 9 percent of the national income. I am as big a fan of international debt forgiveness as anyone in the room but I also know that domestic corruption and incompetence in many of our cities and countries also diminishes the lives of our young children.

As you all know, in the year 2000 the UN Millennium Development Goals set ambitious targets for reducing some of these inequities. However, as the British Treasury Secretary, Gordon Brown, said several weeks ago in remarks just before the G8 summit meeting in

Scotland, at the current rate of progress some of the benchmarks targeted for 2015 would not be achieved for another 150 years.⁹

A third step –and this is what I have been concentrating on in my remarks--is to learn to see with clear eyes the differences that do not delight, the differences that anger and annoy us. It is as bad to ignore those differences through indifference or short-sightedness or political correctness as it is to sink into discrimination and intolerance.

Lastly, we should confront the delights and dangers of difference from the eyes of the children we say we are concerned about. Children may not be knowledgeable about Third World debt, or the imbalance of trade treaties or the society wide devastation Aids brings to the most affected countries. But they know best about their individual experience of the differences that enrich their lives and the differences that slam the doors in their faces. And the eternal dance between those two faces of difference is as intricate for a child as for any of us.

It should be clear I sketch out the perils and delights of diversity not as an academic exercise. I do it as an urgent plea that we confront the full complexity of the world outside our skins as a necessary condition for engaging in research and policy development to improve the lives of children. This conference celebrated and debated the lives of all children. But we miss an unusual opportunity and a responsibility if we don't focus much of our energies on those children for whom differences caused by exclusion and intolerance is a brutal fact of life. It is a fact that may rob them of their future.

⁹ Guardian Unlimited Politics website, <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/development/story> last accessed June 19, 2005.