Being, Becoming and Relationship. Conceptual Challenges of a Child Rights Approach in Development

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Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) brings together two main dynamics, both of which are critical to a child rights approach in development. Its first objective is to extend the fundamental human rights recognised for adults to children. This may be seen for example in provisions regarding freedom of conscience, rights to privacy, rights to voice and participation, and civil liberties. The logic here is *inclusion*: to challenge unthinking assumptions of children's 'difference', and the age-based exclusionary and exploitative practices to which this can give rise. Secondly, the Convention calls for recognition that children's particular status engenders specific forms of vulnerability, interests and entitlements. It thus identifies children as a priority group for special intervention, with regard for example to appropriate schooling and health care provision, and protection from economic and sexual exploitation and exposure to harmful work. The key issue here is *recognition*: that children should not simply be regarded as scale model adults, but taken on their own terms, as a set of development subjects requiring a distinctive and particular approach.

As with women/gender, the default development response to the discovery of a bias or exclusion is to incorporate the population concerned as a specific target group. The child rights agenda clearly lends itself to this, with its call to focus on children as individuals or a social group in their own right. Probably the dominant response of development agencies has therefore been to 'bring children in' as clients or 'beneficiaries' in separate, dedicated programmes. Children become 'cases' which are 'disorganised' from their own context and 're-organised' into the categories given by development intervention (Wood, 1985). Paradoxically, however, deeper reflection on children's situation leads to recognition of their embeddedness within the key relationships which sustain them, particularly those within the family. As Elshtain (1981) argues, the human child needs both separation and 'the gift of affinity' in order to grow. The focus on child rights, however, questions the conventional views of these relations and shifts the reference points for analysis. This paper offers some thoughts on the conceptual challenges which this entails, and suggests some practical tools for pursuing these in development intervention.

Theorising Adult-Child Relations

Like women, children seem to constitute a 'natural symbol' for society (Douglas, 1970; Kandiyoti (ed) 1991). Like canaries down a coal mine, children often give the first indication that something is going wrong. Child malnutrition offers the most common index to famine; a child being disruptive at school may be the first sign of a family at war; child prostitutes or soldiers indicate a society in crisis; child-child murders are interpreted as a sign of moral breakdown. As in these examples, the practical is mixed up with the symbolic. There is a tangible problem, *and* this is already inscribed with anticipation of its wider significance. In the development context, this is most evident in relation to street children, who are defined by their 'out of place' location, and seen by both city authorities and child-focused agencies as a sign of social crisis, whether of crime or poverty. This symbolic aspect overwrites - if with more subtlety - all of the policy writings on children. Children offer a mirror in which adults check and reflect their own hopes and fears.

Views of children and childhood are thus intimately tied up with moral and practical discourses on how they should be treated. As many commentators have pointed out, the dominant approach has been to see children as 'becoming', rather than 'being'. In this view children are unfinished products, and inspire interest not so much for what they are intrinsically, but for the sake of the adults they will become. While their apparent focus is on children, in fact all studies of childhood concern the relations between adults and children. Even if adults do not figure explicitly, they are the implicit reference point. A parallel may be seen here with the gender literature, in which the explicit discussion of women takes place in the context of an implied relationship with men, and particularly husbands, which at least until recently was taken for granted rather than explored. In the gender literature the character of these relations remains contested, between those who see them as a technical issue (complementary 'roles') and those who regard them as constituted through power. By contrast, in all cases the relations between adults and children are seen as

imbued with power. The difference between them lies not in the presence or absence of power relations, but rather in the ways that this power is viewed.

As with understandings of other social relations such as gender, race or class, a number of different views of childhood may be found in any empirical context, and in a range of combinations with one another.[1] It is however possible to identify a number of basic models (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). The first sees the child as savage, pre-social, requiring strict discipline to develop appropriately. Here power is seen as control, and considered properly to rest with the adult. The second sees the child as innocent and pure, needing protection from 'fallen' adult society. Here again power lies with the adult, but it is a gentler power of protection and careful nurture. These two faces of power are combined in a third view, which emphasises adult training to develop the child's natural faculties, and grading to assess his/her 'stage of development'.

The primary thrust of recent social science attention has been to stress the diversity of childhoods across cultural context, space and time, with an attempt to develop more child-centred forms of analysis. One approach is to consider childhood as a sub-culture, with its own distinctive logic and meanings which need to be understood on their own terms. Another views childhood as an aspect of social structure which is universally present, but takes particular forms in specific contexts. Their structural position makes children a distinctive body of social subjects with particular interests, which have some universal features but culturally specific expressions. The most negative view of adult power is taken by radical proponents of the child rights approach. These regard children as a minority or subordinate group, subject to exploitative power relations which should be challenged.

Common to all of these approaches is the centrality of relationship. The danger, however, is that this is seen in binary terms, with adults and children as two fixed categories, defined by their opposition to one another. What is needed instead is an appreciation of the multiplicity of relations amongst and between adults and children, and the variety of forms and terms of engagement which these comprise. This opens the way to explore how both adults and children are at once 'being' and 'becoming', negotiating their present in relation at once to their past selves and in response to encounter with others.

Family Relations

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the significance of relationship to children's lives in repeated references to parents, guardians and families. These are predominantly seen as mediating the state's relationship to the child. The state should ensure the resources are in place - through for example health, education, and social welfare provision - for the family to fulfil its responsibilities to the child. The state recognises families' authority over children, and should intervene only when the child is suffering serious harm in his or her family's care (Article 19). While generally seen as mutually supportive, the relationship between state and family is also a site of tension between divergent interests. First, there is a clear intention to identify the parents/guardians, and not the state, as having the primary economic responsibility for bringing up the child (Articles 18, 27). An outcome of this principle is seen in the Child Support Agency in the UK, which seeks to recover child maintenance payments from absent parents. Second, there is an implicit recognition of the rights of domestic patriarchy, and a concern that the state should not trespass on the legitimate terrain of parental authority. Third, there may be the aim of shielding civil society from unwarranted state intervention, where the governance of childhood has historically legitimated a major expansion of public intervention into the 'private' sphere (Rose, 1989). Despite these potential tensions between the state and parents/guardians, however, the best interests of the child are held to govern the action of both parties. The state is imagined, in effect, as the ultimate good parent of all its citizens.

In all societies the fundamental relationships for the nurture and development of children are structured through the institution of the family. Again, policy and academic discussion of family forms has been overshadowed by moral and symbolic fears about 'break down' and 'fragmentation', especially with regard to dynamics of modernisation and urbanisation. In considering the impact of particular shocks and stresses on the well-being of children and the shape of the family structures which seek to support them, it is

important to remember, however, that in itself diversity is not new. Family and household forms and the relations within them have always been closely inter-related with a range of environmental, social, political, life-cycle and economic factors, as well as the particular dynamics amongst the individuals who constitute them.

As feminist analysis has shown, it is important to go beyond assumptions of household unity and explore internal divisions and conflicts of interest, and the power relations that sustain them. While many studies privilege economic perspectives, others recognise that to understand what different members can and cannot do and what it means, you need to re-examine the ideologies of family that they hold (Whitehead, 1984). Even when they enter the market as hawker or wage earner, it is these 'family' identities which drive what they do and give it meaning, just as they are the prime referent in 'decisions' made within the household (White, 1992). This has two implications for welfare and livelihood interventions. First, it means that to understand the choices people make and the actions they take, we cannot consider them simply as detached individuals, but have to see their selves and persons as *essentially constituted* in and through their relationship to others. While this is true of all people, it is all the more striking for women and children, whose status may be socially and even legally defined as derived from that of an (adult male) other. Second, it means that in terms of their social networks, and the resources which they can therefore access, the idiom of belonging given through more extended and enduring 'family' relations may be more significant to individuals than the particular configuration of 'household' that they find themselves in at any specific time.

It is the givenness of family relations, expressed through biological metaphors such as 'blood ties', that underlies their distinctive character. However, in practice even these relationships are not only *given*, but also *made*. As Bourdieu (1977) states, if kinship is imagined as a map, some paths would be much more well-trodden than others. In any family context, only some of the potential linkages are recognised and put to use. In addition, kinship terms may be used to express personal ties outside of strictly 'family' contexts - patrons and employers in South Asia, for example, are frequently called 'uncle'. Contrary to social science assumptions and much development practice, it is typically not as the member of a distinctive category (children, women, the poor), but in terms of these cross-cutting ego-centred linkages of 'ties that bind' (my family, my tribe) that people most commonly identify themselves (Kandiyoti 1998:149). It is these connections which describe the practical options and entitlement claims of particular individuals and households, which are vital to their well-being.

Recognising how social practice is *person*-centred[2] rather than *category*-centred does not eliminate, but rather re-situates the significance of social structure and power relations. First, as with the family, such personal relations are not necessarily egalitarian, but often hierarchical. Second, these relations are reciprocal. They *both* offer grounds for making claims on others, *and* give others claims on you. In either case the claims may be rejected or their terms contested. Third, such personal relations are not innocent of force or violence. They may offer privilege, but can also expose one to extreme forms of exploitation and abuse. Finally, of course, there is no doubt that at the aggregate level structural differences of age, sex, race and class remain important predictors of difference in opportunities and well-being. The capacity to foster and set the terms of personal linkages is not evenly distributed. Children in particular are vulnerable to claims being made on and over them, which they have comparatively little scope to influence or dispute.

Dynamics of Contradiction and Solidarity

While the work on gender and the household has been fundamental to raising the significance of relationship in development, it also demonstrates the difficulties in conceptualising these adequately. Theorists tend to polarise around one of two positions. Either there is an unproblematic unity, with the interests of all members identified with that of the household head. Or there is an assumption of essential conflict, with different members' contradictory interests resolved through internal contest or bargaining (see eg Kandiyoti, 1988, 1998; Sen, 1991). In fact, of course, all relationships constitute a tension between sameness and difference, between identity, recognition and rejection (Benjamin, 1993). The analytical challenge is to inhabit this tension creatively, with an approach that recognises the genuine mutualities of interest in relationships of love and care, while not denying either their contradictory aspects, or their fundamental implication in power.

Figure 1 aims to offer a framework for such analysis. It is designed for use in a participatory workshop. It identifies two basic dynamics in relationship, those towards solidarity, and those towards contradiction. With the child in the centre, it locates the ideal type of key relationships, those with family, the law and the caring professions within the arc of solidarity, and those of traffickers, employers and customers within that of contradiction. This is the world imagined by the CRC. In practice, however, even the most nurturing relationships involve some conflicts of interest, and essentially contradictory relationships, such as those around employment, may show aspects of mutuality and concern. In addition, the picture will change according to who does the analysis. The configuration in Figure 1 represents an adult model. For children, by contrast, teachers, social workers, police, and even parents may be experienced as figures of domination to be feared. The first use of this framework would therefore be for different groups - middle class or working class parents and children, teachers or police officers - to produce different 'maps' of 'maps' of children's key relationships, and then to share and compare contrasting perspectives.

Figure 1: Children and their Relationships:
Dynamics of Solidarity and Contradiction
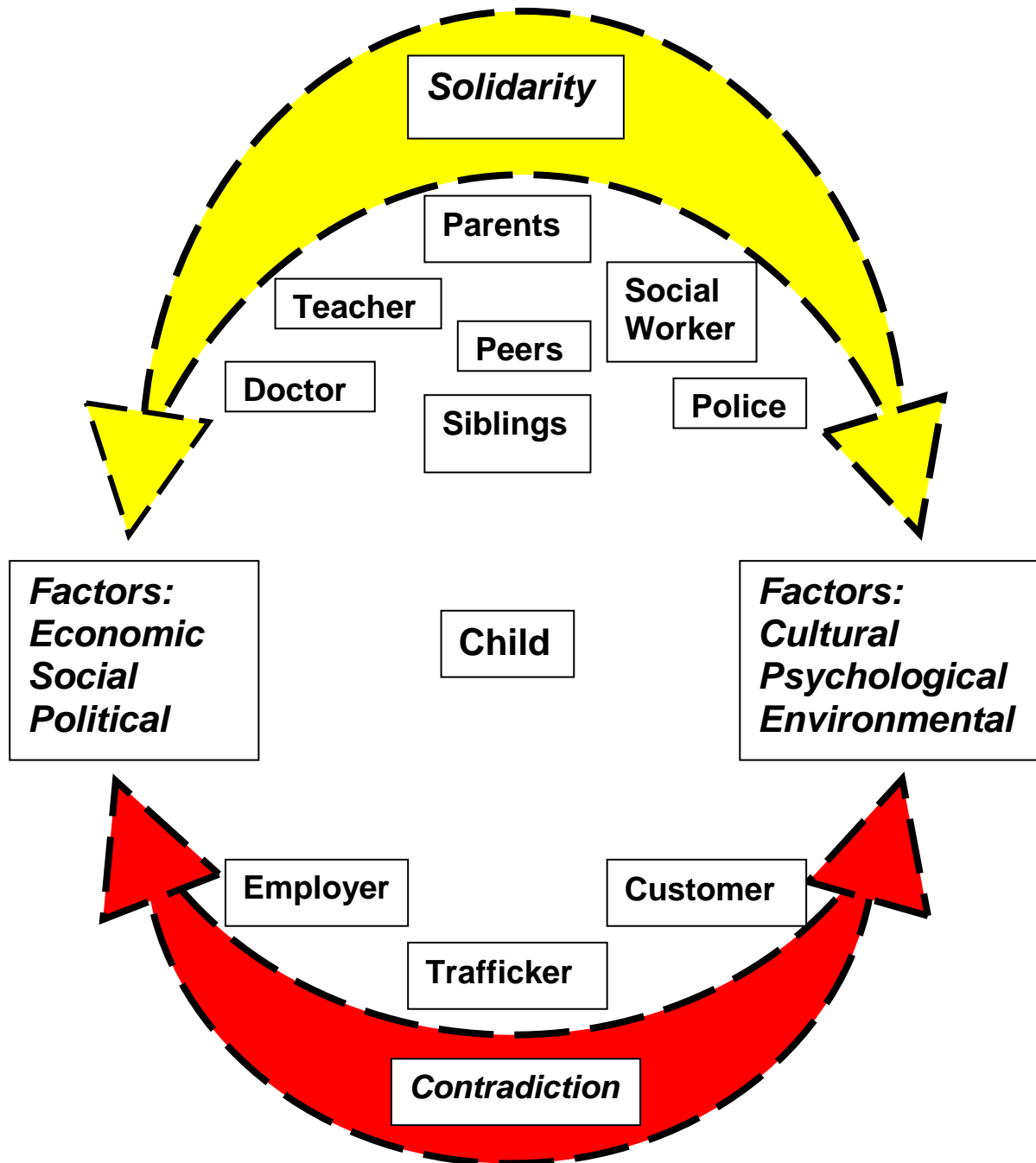
The second use of Figure 1 is to identify the factors that promote solidarity and supportive relationships, and those which tend towards contradiction. Again, this could usefully be explored through a participatory workshop process. Poverty, for example, may push parents to send their children out to work to support themselves, or even to become a quasi-employer, as adult unemployment makes the whole household dependent on the child's earnings. Where the middle class is characterised by a highly competitive culture associated with a limited supply of desirable jobs, this may lead parents to place extreme pressure on children to succeed academically. Teachers who receive low and irregular salaries may have to take other jobs to supplement their earnings, and so short-change the children in their classes. Poor pay and conditions combined with targets for numbers of arrests contribute to making police in Bangladesh behave abusively towards children in the street, arresting them arbitrarily and demanding payment from their families for their release. Immediate stresses may bring a context of growing long-term vulnerability to breaking point.   In Zambia, for example, customary kinship obligations are already strained by urbanisation and economic crisis (Ferguson, 1997). In such a context, children whose parents have died of AIDS may find no uncle or aunt is prepared to take them in, or they may be unwillingly incorporated on a highly contradictory basis, to be treated more as a worker than a child of the house (Guest, 2001).

Attending to these contextual factors which promote solidarity and contradiction in relationships is very important, because it resists the tendency to moralise, to demonise or blame, into which the discourse of child rights rather easily falls. Such moralistic discourse is highly susceptible to being aligned with other axes of power, such as those of race, gender and class. The vices of others - the greed of parents of child workers; the selfish immorality of single mothers and so on - all too easily become a foil for the virtue of the comparatively advantaged speaker who thereby obscures his or her own implication in the problem (White, 2002; Bourgois, 1995). This is not to deny issues of personal choice and responsibility. In the context of development work to address a problem, however, resisting the temptation to moralise and seeking to understand how the actors themselves explain their behaviour is more likely to identify possible points of intervention and so produce a lasting resolution.

The Best Interests of the Child

The principle that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions and institutions concerning children is fundamental to the child rights agenda. It is however controversial - some would say contradictory - in at once conferring rights on children as if they were competent legal subjects, and simultaneously undermining this competence, by providing for these rights to be exercised on their behalf by others (Lewis, 1998). This reflects a broader ambiguity regarding agency. Historically, the expansion of citizenship rights from their limited entitlement to property holding males has followed a process of political struggle, through extension of rights, to their ratification in law. This is the pattern with respect to slaves, women, black people, gay people, and people with disabilities. The case of children, however, is different. Here, there was no social movement preceding the granting of rights, indeed there was no participation by children at all in the formulation of the CRC (Lewis, 1998). As 'child participation' has become the touchstone of development legitimacy, this was rectified in preparations for the follow up United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children, held in May 2002. But the fetish of 'participation' itself indicates continuing ambiguities over agency. One's participation is not at issue within a process initiated and driven by oneself.

Ironically, it may be precisely because of this ambivalence about agency that the principle of the best interests of the child is critical to a rights-based approach: Does the present development fashion for 'children and governance', for example, really reflect a children's agenda…? Although overshadowed by the dominance of participatory approaches in development, the idea of 'objective' interests which can be determined by outside observers has a long intellectual history. Maxine Molyneux (1985), in her reflection on the Nicaraguan revolution, for example, states clearly that women have structural gender interests in change, even if they neither recognise, nor seek to achieve them. In principle, therefore, there is no problem with the idea that (outsider) adults should be able to determine the best interests of (insider) children. In practice, however, there are often difficulties in the assumptions of superior understanding on the part of self-styled benefactors. Aggravating this general problem, there may be a specific issue regarding the fuzzy boundaries between parties in an intimate relationship which can make it difficult to

specify independent interests. This applies to parents and children in particular, but may also be more widely evident, since any relationship between adults and children has a tendency to take on something of the parent-child idiom, and its attendant assumptions of comprehending the smaller within the larger interest.

A radical method for determining where the best interests of children lie is proposed by David Oldman (1994). He advocates analysing adult-child relationships on a class model as a 'generational mode of production' for 'producing' human capital. His key claim is that 'Children create *childwork*, that is, work done by adults on the organisation and control of children's activities' (*ibid:* 155). This includes reproductive work within the home, but also the professions of teaching, social work, child psychiatry and health and so on. The character of childwork is given by the interplay between the 'generational mode of production' and the two other stratification systems of gender and employment. 'Exploitation' of children by adults takes place when the 'relations of production' governing 'childwork' are sub-optimal for children, while maximising benefit to adults. Schools with high student-teacher ratios to minimise central costs while not undermining teacher salaries, for example, might not be positively *bad* for children, but would nevertheless, by these criteria, be exploitative: ie not organised in a way that prioritises 'the best interests of the child.' While the Marxist language that Oldman uses may be shocking and to some off-putting, the proliferation of 'childwork' for adults entailed in the institutionalisation of 'child rights' is striking. While there are clearly still important issues of basic inclusion and access, Oldman's model offers a means of going beyond these to analyse the terms of exchange between adults and children where children are 'included in'. Applying his approach to 'youth' departments, children's feeding schemes, education systems, fund-raising initiatives, multi-lateral and even child rights agencies, analysing where value is being made and added and where expropriated, may offer some challenging findings.

Dynamics of Transformation

The final challenge of placing relationships central to understanding children's well-being lies in the dynamic of transformation. This underlines the importance of a person-centred rather than category-centred approach to understanding social practice, as introduced above, since it has major implications for both agency and entitlements. While the needs and capacities of all people change and develop over time, this process is particularly marked amongst children. This is a further challenge to the development convention of a 'target group': in the case of children, the target is a moving one! It is also a major challenge to most theorising of social relations, which assumes connection between two (or more) fixed categories, such as those of class, race, or sex. Age is fundamentally different to this, in that it is essentially transformative. The key variables of 'adults' and 'children' are not simply parallel, but sequential categories. This makes a fundamental difference to both consciousness and action. For not only do individuals grow through childhood to adulthood, but they also 'read back' and 'read forward' their own experience and that of others. Their histories and their expectations of the future thus affect both their present choices and how they relate across the generations.

The dynamic and transformative nature of age based differences has three major implications for analysis. In the first place, it problematises the tendency to draw a strict opposition between adults and children. This suggests a need to re-consider the assumptions about all-powerful adults which derive from their appearing as 'other' in a child-focused approach.

Secondly, recognising the dynamic character of age draws attention to the diversity within each of the categories. Critically, this is not due simply to the 'complication' of other aspects of social difference, such as gender, ethnicity, caste or class, but is *internal* to the dimension of age itself. Differences of age, capacity, size and birth order are often finely marked amongst children themselves, underlining their elaboration in the broader social structure. While age-based notions of identity and difference may be especially important amongst children, they also continue into adulthood, through notions such as those in the same year at university being 'batchmates', as well as structures of seniority more broadly.

Thirdly, the transformative character of age means that the relationships in which children are embedded are themselves constantly undergoing change and re-negotiation. This has significant implications not

only for analysis, but also for the character of development intervention. While development programmes and projects famously assume a time-frame basis ('the five year plan') they tend to presume a constant environment and constituency, into which any changes that occur are attributable directly to the programme itself. While this at the best of times exhibits considerable development hubris, when working with children it is clearly not the case. An eight year old child at the beginning of a five year programme will be a thirteen year old adolescent by its end, with a very different outlook, needs and interests, quite independently of anything the project may achieve. Interventions for children thus need to differentiate services and indicators of success by age and categories of children, and monitoring and evaluation systems must reflect how the needs and interests of their 'clients' change over the project period. Finally, programmes need to deal with what one director of a child rights agency described as 'the problem of children who become adults.' Particular programme interventions for children must assume that their clients will move on from them, and so look to the continuities and complementarities of that programme with young adults' longer term 'career' development beyond it. This is a considerable challenge where funders encourage agencies to demonstrate 'their' impact and inadequate co-ordination remains one of the most frequent criticisms of programme evaluations.

Conclusion

This paper argues that making children central to development and social analysis requires a person-centred rather than category-centred approach, which recognises the fundamental importance of relationship to people's actions, entitlements and well-being. This is not simply of academic interest, but contains a number of practical implications for development policy. In the first place, it suggests that children do not constitute a social group that can be abstracted from its context. 'Child-centred' development practice must not be 'child-only': social and economic justice for poor children must be tackled in the context of their families and communities. Similarly, children do not live their lives in 'sectors', rather, the well-being of children will depend critically on how dynamics within different sectors act on one another. This raises important questions for two key elements within development practice: the 'default' tactic of abstracting a 'target group' for direct intervention; and the current preference for a policy logic of vertical integration through Sector Wide Approaches (SWAPs). Finally, recognition of the relatively short time-scale of children's critical developing years, and the commitment to the best interests of the child adds urgency to calls to prioritise social and equity considerations in development. This means that all areas of policy must be open to question, including macroeconomic and foreign policy, and support should not be given to economic or political objectives which undermine welfare and increase inequality. The devastating impact on poor children of Structural Adjustment Programmes in Africa and sanctions against Iraq are clearly relevant here. The paper also argues that the principle should be applied not only on a case by case basis, but also in assessing institutional arrangements, and whether these maximise the potential benefit to children.

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Endnotes

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[1] See Frankenberg (1993), for example, on the ways in which even in the course of a single piece of dialogue, individuals move between and selectively employ a range of different discourses on race.

[2] Where persons are understood as 'being-in-relationship'.