

## New Strategic Focus

In April 2010 the Board of the Childwatch International Research Network identified three strategic foci to help define and prioritise our contribution and efforts to advance children's rights through research, networking and knowledge exchange. The three foci, which represent areas of interest and concern to the international children's rights community, are: Governance and Participation, Protective Environments, and Violence. Each one capitalises on Childwatch's previous and current initiatives and signals new avenues of enquiry for the future as we enhance our networking potential and research capacity within and between Key Institutions and other institutions and agencies.

This document outlines the three strategic foci so Key Institutions and researchers can be encouraged to consider the ways in which they might be applied in the context of their work. Each theme is defined and then elaborated upon with research questions to provide a platform for future Childwatch networking, research and capacity-building efforts. Childwatch also welcomes the development of other initiatives within each of the three areas.

## Participation and Governance

This strategic focus recognises the profound implications, and enormous challenges, of the UNCRC for the recognition of children as citizens with a full range of civil rights, including the right to receive information, to express their views, to participate in decision-making processes, and to freedom of association. The movement to improve children's participation rights has been important in furthering the fulfilment of children's rights, particularly their right to protection. However, in most parts of the world, children are still generally not expected to express their views or to participate in decisions, even in matters that centrally concern them. They are often invisible and voiceless recipients of adult decisions. While the UNCRC has fostered a great deal of discussion and experimentation on children's participation, this has generally affected only a minority of children and some groups of children, such as younger children or those with special needs, have barely been included in the debate.

Childwatch aims to further advance the civil rights of children by working with existing and new partners, in a culturally sensitive manner, to identify the risks, challenges and benefits of supporting children's greater participation and addressing these through reflective strategies of research and intervention, as well as policy and practice developments. Priority areas for further investigation include:

- How is the meaning of citizenship in childhood conceptualized?
- How does the public (including children, parents, caregivers and professionals) conceive of children as citizens with civil rights and capacities?
- How has the UNCRC been presented to parents and caregivers within their particular socio-economic-cultural context and what are their doubts, fears, struggles and successes in understandings children's rights and responsibilities?
- What strategies can be employed to better understand and overcome adult resistance to children's civil rights?
- Which educational strategies regarding children's civil rights need to be developed to create more authentic governance with children in all of the settings of their lives?

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- How are certain groups of marginalised girls and boys (such as those with disabilities or HIV) excluded from the exercise of civil rights and what strategies are needed to better respect the inclusion of all children?
- How can children's participation rights be fostered in authoritarian regimes and failed States where even adult citizens have little or no civil rights?
- Which research methods need to be developed and evaluated for community-based data collection and professional engagement with children related to the fulfilment of their rights in government and local government processes and in the settings that shape their daily lives (e.g. the family, children's organizations, child care settings, schools, hospitals, courts, community and faith-based organizations, non-governmental organizations)?
- How can systems (e.g. law, health, education, welfare), institutions and professionals be supported to engage with children and advance their civil rights?
- Which research methods are appropriate to the competencies and experiences of children in the early years (under 8 years old) to enable families, professionals and policy makers to systematically understand their perspectives?
- How can child research capacity-building be strengthened in contexts that rely on low-cost, locally adapted and creative research approaches?
- Which training materials need to be developed to assist new and experienced researchers undertake high-quality, effective and respectful research studies with children that adhere to the principles of ethical engagement with children (including researcher obligations to respect the principles of justice, consent, confidentiality and avoiding doing harm to child participants – whether they are subjects, respondents or researchers themselves)?

## Protective Environments for Children

As a global network, Childwatch is committed to promoting research efforts and insights in the cause of children's rights and well-being. A prominent focus of public and professional discourses about children in many countries concerns child protection. While understood and enacted in a range of different ways, formal child protection processes engage with issues of risk and deficit in the child's circumstances since these are seen as threatening the child's well-being. However, it has become increasingly clear that getting formal child protection to work well for children is not a simple matter. A focus on risk and deficit may not provide the whole picture.

A preoccupation with risk and deficit can obscure the naturally nurturing and protective qualities often present in the child's daily context, experience and environment. For most children, their best hope of care, nurturing and protection lies in the household, the school, the neighbourhood or the village. This is not to underestimate the ambivalence and conflict that may lie close to the surface in many of a child's key relationships. There are many influences – good and bad - in the child's daily experiences that shape his / her opportunities and development. Most important is the child's relationship with parents and immediate family, but also their relations and experiences in school, extended family, neighbourhood or village, and in other networks such as faith communities. These influences interact and mutually shape one another's impact on the child. They, in turn, are also affected by wider forces - social, economic, cultural and legal - within which the more immediate protective environments are nested. Protection and nurturing of children relies not just on close relationships on the one hand or formal systems on the other. Arguably, environments protective and supportive of a child's development and thriving are constituted by commitment and actions at family and community levels, as well as, where relevant, by provision through policy and services. The key point is that services and policies are a subset of the protective environments, not the other way around. In the most extreme cases of need, this is reversed and the formal system may be most important. However, such examples are the exception and may only be true for a limited period of time. Thus, where formal systems assume more importance than informal support and helping, this

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is very much the exception, even in the North. An analogy is in the arena of health. In most cases a person's health is supported by family and community level influences with formal care a small subset of the overall effort at sustaining and supporting health. When someone is very ill the formal care becomes predominant, but this is exceptional and only for a certain generally limited period. Similarly, child well-being depends most on protective environments, rather than on formal systems.

Historically, many policies and debates about children proceed from a deficit perspective – highlighting problems in the children's context or in the children themselves. Interest in children has often been driven by concerns about the child as a problem or the child with problems. The child, or his or her environment, has been seen as deficient in some way. This historic trend has also become manifest more recently through a frequent preoccupation with risk and risk aversion in the considerations of children's well-being and needs. Life is dangerous for children and they must be made safe.

This preoccupation arises in the minority world primarily, yet its influence is clearly emerging in the South. In the North, it can lead to a reduced valuing of the child's everyday contexts and experiences which are often seen as sources of risk. Formal protection is seen as the best safeguard against harm and abuse. Such systems of formal protection are intended to protect children from the dangers they are believed to face in their daily lives. Yet this approach foregrounds abuse while obscuring more structural issues such as poverty. It also consumes scarce resources that arguably might be deployed more effectively. Attention to risk issues may also mean disproportionate attention to risk in poorer and less powerful communities

However well intentioned such formal systems may be, they have many unintended side effects in terms of, for example, disrupting and disempowering natural helping systems, without necessarily achieving the intended gains and benefits for the child.

There is also a real danger of an uncritical transfer of models and assumptions from the North to the South. These models and assumptions are based on a relatively elaborate system of services and surveillance in children's daily lives that are already contested in the North and that may not fit well in the different social, cultural and economic realities of the South.

Childwatch welcomes research initiatives and partnerships that aim to explore various questions about protective environments. The UNCRC and the UNVAC report provide a relevant backdrop and an important stimulus to investigations aimed at answering these and related questions:

- What forms do protective environments for children take under different social, economic and cultural conditions?
- What precisely constitutes and sustains these protective environments?
- Who are the actors and what are the processes in protective environments? How do these play out under various specific circumstances?
- What promotes or impedes the emergence and sustenance of protective environments?
- Which forms of protective environments best fit with which contexts?
- How effective are such protective environments in securing child well-being and adult support for efforts at promoting children's rights and well-being?

## Violence and Children

Violence may be a prominent feature of many children's lives. It may find expression in many forms, in many contexts and through many perpetrators. At home, it may be the result of violent and intimidating behaviour by a man, the father or the mother's male partner, a brother or other relative. At times it may be female-initiated violence. At school, it may be the result of bullying by peers, taking the form of physical threat or assault, or the result of assault by teachers. On the street, in the village, or in the refugee camp, it may arise from the actions of peer groups or criminal gangs who coerce youth into silence or compliance.

Violence may be the consequence of war or the presence of legal or illegal armies in communities. Soldiers may seek to enforce their control with the use of covert or overt threat and violence.

Violence may cause physical violation, harm, scarring, injury and disfigurement. It may also be symbolic, taking more subtle and often insidious forms, attacking the spirit and morale, demeaning social and ethnic status. Its impact may often be pervasive and enduring as in the case of racism.

Violence against children may be direct or indirect, using them as intended targets or victims, or forcing them to serve as unwilling witnesses and bystanders.

Violence may frequently combine physical and symbolic dimensions leading to grave physical, emotional and moral consequences impacting on children at individual, family and community levels. It may have complex roots arising from tensions, conflicts and social change impacting on the arenas of gender, ethnicity and economy. It may thrive especially in conditions of uncertainty and instability.

Violence is not unknown in the inner world of childhood but, more typically, it is violence from the adult world that spills into the world of children.

The first step to combating violence in childhood is to understand its nature and dynamics. Childwatch is committed to supporting the implementation of the recommendations of UNVAC. It seeks to encourage research that engages with such relevant research questions as:

- How do children understand and cope with violence in their lives?
- What conditions permit and sustain violence impacting on children?
- What measures are effective in preventing or reducing levels of violence impacting on children in different contexts?
- How can awareness about levels of violence and its harmful impact be raised?
- Who are the key actors who may play a positive part in combating violence?