The adult North and the young South
Reflections on the civilizing mission of children’s rights

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Civilization of the children of the ‘savages’ in the colonial world was an inherent part of the colonization mission in Africa, the Americas and Oceania in the 19th century. This was partly because children were regarded as relatively easy to influence, and partly because they could be instrumental in civilizing ‘the rest’, that is the adult population and society at large. Children were, for example, abducted into mission schools and taught the ‘word of God’ (Meinert 2009). One aspect of this project was the enlightenment of minds through literacy and reading the bible. Another was changing people’s lifestyle through dress, eating and drinking habits, discipline and housing (Hansen 1984), and by stressing individual physical boundaries and hygiene as modern responsibilities of the ‘proper person’ (Beidelman 1974, Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). In today’s global South the idea of civilizing through children has continued with the development of mass schooling systems and various other child-focused development projects, many of which depend heavily upon financial support from foreign donors.

Dependency on foreign aid, combined with a number of human rights declarations and conventions, put pressure on governments of the independent, post-colonial nation-states to comply with internationally defined standards such as the UN Millennium Development Goals. This also includes the field of children’s rights, which has been nurtured by a powerful global civil society, with national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) functioning as important agenda-setting institutions (Fuchs 2007). On the international scene, the 1990s witnessed an unprecedented rise in children’s issues, reflected in the almost universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Boyden 1997). Consequently, rights-based development rhetoric has had to be adopted by many national organizations in the global South. This has led to the export of internationally defined standards for a ‘good childhood’ through various development programmes. While many NGOs are genuinely working for an improvement of children’s conditions, they have thus also taken on the role as second guardians in order to cultivate ‘proper’ children and parents who can live up to the supposedly universal ideals of a ‘good childhood’ in which a child is protected by parents, who make sure that the child goes to school to learn, is properly dressed and washed, has adequate nutrition, has leisure time, and does not do any work that is considered harmful.

With this article, we seek to encourage debate on the normativity and universal ambitions of the child rights movement by shedding light on the crucial role that NGOs play as civilizing institutions in the global South. The civilizing project is obviously not confined to today’s children only, but reflects a historical process in which children have – perhaps increasingly – become objects for adult and institutional intervention. As historians have noted (Ariès 1979 [1960], Hendrick 1992), the ‘taming’ and socialization of children, followed by, among other developments, the spread of mass schooling and protective labour laws, was an inherent part of the modernization process in 19th-century Europe and the Americas. Recent anthropological studies have similarly pointed out how institutions in contemporary Denmark, in their attempt to teach children appropriate ways of behaving and interacting, engage in a highly normative civilizing project through which certain categories of children are marked as more appropriately ‘social’ or civil than others, and how this inevitably feeds into processes of social inclusion and exclusion (Anderson 2008, Gulløv 2008).

Such civilizing projects become even more visible in the context of development intervention targeting children of the global South, because they are linked to fundamental structural inequalities in the current global order. This implies a patronization not only of children and parents, but also of nations allegedly not able to take care of their own citizens. This leads to a kind of infantilized dependency (Burman 1994), established and reproduced through three fundamentally unequal and interrelated relationships.

First, there is the child-adult relationship inherent to the CRC described above, namely the underlying patronization and ‘infantilization’ of nations in the global South. Second, a hegemonic position of global North vis-à-vis South is revealed which is largely unproductive for the South. Lastly, there is the way national Southern elites...
relate to the North, often seeing it as their mission to drive development of their countries through, among others, a civilization of their ‘backward peoples’. With reference to the CRC, and mediated by Southern elites, the global North assumes as it were a parenting role towards the global South, where the ‘adult North’ can bestow rights and duties on the ‘young South’, and if the South fails to comply with these, can implement sanctions.

**Cultural relativity versus universalism**

The field of children’s rights is interesting from an anthropological point of view because it exposes problematic taken-for-granted ideas about ‘proper’ childhood and ‘proper’ parenthood as standardized in a narrow Northern context and politically legitimised through universal rights.

This article raises familiar dilemmas associated with the adoption and implementation of universal rights: to what extent can and should existing social and cultural practices be respected while still insisting on a set of universally valid rights? This is linked to the debate about donor aid as ‘leverage’ to influence policy in the countries receiving the aid. Should/can aid be unconditional? If paternalism comes with resources, how is the level of involvement negotiated? The anthropological approach helps us to explore how specific practices are tied to moral categories and how the language of rights is framed within dominant moral orders of good and bad (Reynolds et al. 2006).

This article is based on our experiences over the last decade in Uganda, Nepal and Vietnam, respectively, within the areas of education, health and child/youth issues. We draw on ethnographic data collected through participant observation among and interviews with children, young people and their families. These groups have been targeted in various ways by NGOs and other development projects because their lifestyles contradict and challenge notions of a ‘normal and proper’ childhood. We also draw on experience gained from taking part in applied and policy-related work within the field of child rights. To approach children’s rights as a social process helps us to comprehend how campaigns for human rights contribute to the application of norms, knowledge and compliance (Merry 2006). This offers insight into the bureaucratic and highly standardized practices and discourses which tend to surround human rights and planned development.

**Planned development and the mission of children’s rights**

Children have become increasingly visible as an interest group in the political domain over the last 15-20 years. This is most clearly manifested in the adoption of the CRC. This is not to say that children had been ignored by policy-makers prior to this, but rather that the focus on children has changed from one of humanitarian concern and social welfare to one on children as independent political and social actors (Black 1996), at least rhetorically.

International co-ordination for child and youth protection was initiated as early as in the mid-19th century, motivated by a concern for public welfare and penal reform (Fuchs 2007). It was formalized in 1924, when the League of Nations adopted the World Child Welfare Charter, based on five key principles for the protection of children. These were the rights to material, moral and spiritual development, to protection against economic exploitation, and to an upbringing towards societal responsibility (Black 1996). With the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1959, children’s rights were further expanded and included the right to be protected against discrimination on the basis of, among other divisions, race, colour, gender and language, and the right to a name and nationality. Finally, in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted, and within a few years ratified by all countries in the world except for the US and Somalia.

The CRC has been considered particularly innovative compared to previous declarations within the field of child rights for two reasons. First, it is legally binding, which means that once the convention has been ratified, under certain circumstances other state parties to the convention have a right and duty to intervene in national affairs in favour of the human rights of the child. Second, it recog-
Children’s positions in generational hierarchies are generally more distinct and more clearly recognized by both children and adults in many societies of the global South – for example, in Vietnam, where hierarchical relations fundamental to Confucianism place children in a structurally inferior position with regard to elders. It is therefore noteworthy that a law on Child Protection, Care and Education was introduced into Vietnamese national legislation in 1991, one year after Vietnam ratified the CRC (Burr 2006). This law includes a paragraph stating that children are expected to show affection, respect and obedience towards their parents – a clause which can be interpreted as the Vietnamese authorities’ response/resistance to the individualistic approach of CRC (ibid.).

Similarly, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child was adopted by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1990. In many respects its provisions are modelled on those of the CRC. However, it provides for the protection of children against harmful and potentially exploitative cultural practices with an emphasis on ‘customs and practices prejudicial to the health or life of the child and those customs and practices discriminatory to the child on the grounds of sex and others status’ (Article 21.1). This could address situations in which what would elsewhere be seen as child abuse is justified on the basis of ‘culture’.

As noted above, the CRC provides a legitimate basis for states and organizations to encourage UN bodies to intervene in national affairs of child protection and socialization, for example in cases of child soldiering and child labour. However, it would be an illusion to believe that all state parties are in an equal position to raise issues and be taken seriously. Northern states are occasionally subject to criticism from the international community too: recently Denmark was criticized by international organizations for the inhuman treatment of children of asylum seekers. However, a crucial difference is that there will seldom be any formal consequences, conditionalities or sanctions towards Northern states, as they do not receive any ‘help’ from the international community. Although all

Fig. 3 (above). Classroom in government school, Kathmandu.
Fig. 4 (below). Group discussion with squatter children.


Fig. 5 Young children eating a meal of dhalbat (rice and lentils) in squatter home, Kathmandu.


and abductions and attacks on villages continue. NGOs criticize the rebels as well as government institutions for their failure to protect children specifically, as both sides use child soldiers.

International NGOs played their part in making the Ugandan government take the case to the International Criminal Court, mainly by pointing to violations of children’s rights. Children were being abducted, taken away from their homes, their schools and families; boys were forced to become soldiers at a young age, and young girls became so-called sex slaves. In witnessing this and allowing it to happen the Ugandan state was criticized for failing in its obligation to protect children. NGOs (and others) cited the CRC, which binds state parties to take all feasible measures to ensure that children under 15 do not take part in hostilities and are protected in times of armed conflict. We are painfully aware of and acknowledge the atrocities against children in this war. But the international organizations could have highlighted other issues too: adult women and men were also abducted, raped, tortured, hit by land mines. However, the focus has been on the failure to protect children and the use of child soldiers. From the perspective of the global North, child abuse seems particularly unacceptable compared to, for example, the abduction of or violence against adults. This is because it challenges the dominant model of childhood, which portrays children as innocent victims in need of protection and as competent actors in need of encouragement (cf. James et al. 1998).

A case from Nepal similarly reveals how internationally defined standards derived from the field of child rights are circulated and to varying degrees integrated into national projects and local practices. In 2000, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs took the initiative to strengthen the child rights perspective in Danish development aid. Compared to other European countries (such as the UK and Sweden), Denmark was seen by child rights advocates to be far behind in its efforts to promote this area and had, at this moment, no formulated development policy on children’s rights. One of the first concrete steps taken was to plan an ‘identification and formulation’ mission to Nepal, to serve as a model for other countries receiving aid from Denmark. Meetings with stakeholders from relevant ministries and NGOs took as their point of departure the UN’s Concluding Observations on Nepal. One of many concerns of the Committee on the Rights of the Child regarded the principle of non-discrimination embedded in Article 2 of the convention, which states that state parties shall respect and ensure the rights of each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind. In the eyes of the Committee this was violated by the preference for sons, early marriages and the differential marriage age for boys and girls – respectively 18 and 16 with parental consent, and 21 and 18 without. It is noteworthy that this difference in marriage age of boys and girls was automatically interpreted as an indication of discrimination and that ‘difference’ here was translated into a notion of inequality. The team raised the issue of marriage age with representatives of the Nepali National Planning Commission; the immediate answer from the Commission’s joint secretary was that change was out of the question. She was amenable to discussing issues of child labour, disabled children and early childhood development, but not the marriage age. She explained the provision with reference to cultural tradition, stating that it had always been like that and that it should not be changed.

Seen in this light it was striking that, as Valentin observed during fieldwork in previous years, many young couples from the squatter community where she did her research got married when officially under age. Most of them had eloped, a common marriage strategy in the case of inter-
caste liaisons. For this reason the parents seldom approved the match and because pre-marital sexual relations are generally frowned upon the young couples saw no other option than to elope, as a way of formalizing the relationship before the parents found what they considered a more suitable marriage partner. NGO staff involved in the area were very ready to comment critically on these practices, specifically the age of the young people involved. Parents as well as children were aware that the girls in particular were officially under age, and began to disclose their biological age as a way of frustrating the marriage. There were several cases of girls who were 16 on paper, but who beyond the gaze of the authorities and the NGOs revealed that they were only 13-14 years old.

Revealing the powerful discourses on ‘proper’ childhood being negotiated in different social and political arenas, these two cases illustrate how, armed with the CRC, both organizations and bilateral donors have acquired a role as moral watchdogs towards those seen as exploiting and discriminating against their ‘own’ children. But what is also interesting is that, as the case from Nepal shows, national policy-makers and ordinary people do not passively accept such criticism, but seek to safeguard and maintain certain practices.

NGOs as civilizing institutions

Children – as future citizens and as a mediating pathway to the adult population – have long been central to a civilizing project worked through enlightenment and ‘proper’ lifestyles. In many countries where children may not have access to ordinary schooling, NGOs play a crucial role in the socialization and ‘enlightenment’ of children. Moreover, in contrast to conventional secular schools, which tend to portray themselves as politically neutral institutions that transmit scientific knowledge, many NGOs see themselves as defenders of human rights and as political watchdogs of governments and guardians/parents, both seen to be potentially exploitative towards children. Embedded in a discourse of children’s participation and empowerment, organizations advocating children’s rights nonetheless contribute to a civilizing project which is in essence close to that of the old Christian missions, namely correcting social and bodily behaviour of both children and guardians in order to produce proper civic persons.

Examples from Nepal demonstrate how urban poor children are often targeted by NGOs through sponsorship programmes, literacy classes and skills training because they are considered deprived and particularly prone to becoming street children (Valentin 2005). While the NGOs’ work starts from a genuine interest in supporting and uplifting marginalized children and their families, their assistance often carries patronizing and moralizing overtones. Valentin’s research shows how social workers explicitly condemned men who drank large quantities of alcohol and gambled, scolded parents for not sending their children to school and for having too many children, or ridiculed people for visiting traditional healers or for what they saw as superstition. Children were directly instructed to dress properly – i.e. in clean, ironed clothes – before going to school, and some of the young couples who eloped, often in inter-caste marriages, explicitly expressed their fear of the reaction of the social workers who deemed them too young to marry (ibid.).

In Uganda, Meinert was involved in a Child Rights Education programme run by an international NGO (Save the Children Denmark). Within this programme child rights workers were trained to give local children, teachers and parents lectures on children’s rights, and to act as mediators and observers in cases of conflict between children and parents, children and teachers etc. During this project a good number of children learned part of the CRC by heart, and obviously enjoyed some of the training, which
The issue of children’s rights is a sensitive and complex one. Many children all over the world experience considerable hardship, and not just in the South. Thus there is indeed a need for global action in order to improve their situation. Many interventions in the lives of children are well-intended and have also been extremely effective, particularly in the field of health. We would also not argue unrealistically that aid should be given entirely value-free, i.e. without regard to the ways in which it is dispensed. Nevertheless, while great progress has been made in ameliorating the living conditions of children worldwide, the relationship between rights, morality and civilization implied in the mission of enhancing children’s rights in the global South leads to the installation of certain moral codes of behaviour regarding how parents, teachers and other adults representing institutions should act towards and treat children. Children of the global South thereby become objects for outside political intervention (Pupavac 2000), while the adult populations become targets constantly blamed for children’s suffering. This produces a double-sided patronization of children, parents and states.

In such child-adult relationships, a model of childhood is sometimes promoted that is based on the idea that children should be protected from and by the adult world. This is reinforced by unequal power relations, which mean that the global North has the power to intervene by commenting on child-adult relationships in the global South. Childhood, according to the Northern model, should be a period of play and training for adulthood, and children should be protected from work and other supposedly adult activities. All in all, children should be ensured what is regarded as “best interests of the child”: is it in the best interests of any child not to work or participate in adult activities if this is how families survive, or what children need to learn in order to have a future? Furthermore, to regard children’s rights as separate from those of their parents creates an inherent paradox, because on the one hand children are deemed competent to make decisions themselves, while on the other hand they are seldom considered able to exercise guidance and support. This means, firstly, that NGOs tend to take over part of the parental responsibilities, and secondly that not only children but also parents are targeted by NGOs and donors from the international community. In other words, infantilization of “savages” will continue to be an inherent part of a civilizing project unless we pause to reflect on current actions and revise them accordingly.
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