Reconstructing Children’s Rights
An online institute about dismantling racism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy in humanitarian and development efforts to protect children and support families

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Conversation#2:

Confronting Colonialism, Racism and Patriarchy in Child Welfare and Child Rights Programming

OVERVIEW

Building on Conversation #1, this session will expand our political imagination by delving deeper into the international children’s rights and child protection space. If inequalities and injustices are apparent across wide swaths of humanitarian aid and international development, their roots in racism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy are especially problematic in fields such as child rights and protection, where the roles of children and caregivers in their families and communities will vary from context to context. As the international development and humanitarian communities seek to create quick, cost-effective technical solutions, the likelihood of the imposition of conceptual and practice models that replicate oppressive, patriarchal, and racist norms is high. We must examine the incongruence of these models, programming and policy interventions and the ways in which their (mis)application can increase harm to children and families.

This discussion presupposes that historical storytelling is needed to understand children’s rights – What are the historical trajectories of the people, programmatic approaches, and policies operating in international humanitarian and development spaces? If white supremacy culture is identified by defensiveness, perfectionism, paternalism, and a sense of urgency, how are these translated within the international child protection and rights field?

The (Mis)application of Child Welfare

The approaches that child protection and child welfare systems adopt in conceptualizing children, families, and the State’s self-appointed role in intervening in the lives of children and families reflect the cultures and contexts in which they emerge. In the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Denmark, New Zealand, and Australia, among other places, racism, white supremacy, colonialism, and expansionism guided how government policies treat families, parents, caregivers and children and young people in need. We have seen these tendencies in the United States, in which US child welfare policies have taken the view that low-income children, in particular children of color, are a “problem” that need to be “solved” through removal or assimilation; given this conceptual starting point, it is an unfortunate

reality that Black, Brown, and Indigenous children are overwhelmingly removed from their families in a system ostensibly designed to protect them.\(^2\) The indigenous and community methods of parenting, caregivers, and children and young people rearing practices were ignored or annulled by the statutory services. We have seen this same pattern in Australia, New Zealand and Canada with Aboriginal, Maori, and First Nations populations, respectively. As Catherine Love noted, “statutory child welfare services themselves exist within a wider colonial context which structures the power dynamics, ideologies and perceptions permeating social services.”\(^3\)

Over the last few decades, as the international child protection field has developed, it has tended to transport, replicate, and export Anglo-Saxon models of child welfare and statutory services, rooted in structural racism and colonial ideologies, to areas all over the world. One could argue that the humanitarian aid industry has, in essence, exported and replicated models of child protection that are well documented to be racist in their treatment of Black and Brown children. These models are further layered on top of existing colonial structures of the international development and humanitarian aid industry – systems and structures imposed from the outside with an outsiders’ lens.\(^4\)

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The (Mis)application of Child Rights and Protection

In turn, the humanitarian system – its structures, systems of power, influence, and ethos-- has had an impact on the workings of the child rights and protection fields. Over the last few decades, the child protection field has focused on the development of technical resources and prioritized the professionalization of the field. While this technocratic “professionalization” has led to the growth of the sector, as Jason Hart has noted, this “technocratic approach on its own is too narrow and attends insufficiently to issues of power.”

Child protection and rights programming design has tended to promote simplistic, paternalistic interventions in which children and families are protected, rescued and saved, often pushing them further away from their communities, cultures, and social norms. The rights-based programming has focused on seemingly apolitical, technocratic programming that purports to respond to child survival, development, protection, and participation. The programming and funding have taken a siloed rather than collectivist, intersectional approach across communities and across race, gender, ethnicity, class and gender identity.

This technocratic, apolitical approach to child protection funding and programming, ultimately, has led to a Northern elite (white), top-down, and solutions-oriented ecosystem divorced from the socio-economic and political realities which these organizations and stakeholders are situated in. These power dynamics have resulted in “an application of a mechanistic, blueprint driven approach,” which has primarily focused on governments and formal structures, and, ultimately lacks grounding in the informal structures and lived experiences of children, families and communities and has struggled to reach better outcomes for children and their families. Children and families are passive beneficiaries, disconnected from levels of power and influence, depoliticized, with little or no agency due to their age as well as other marginalizing factors such as ethnicity, class, race, and gender identity. And, while the child rights and protection work is part of the political economy and the oppression by the State, the field does not operate in this way, operates within a technical lens, further de-politicizing the children’s field.

This session will bring two scholarly voices whose work examines these considerations of politics and power dynamics in international child protection to the center of our discussions.

6. Ibid.
8. Refer to Jason Hart resources.
Dr. Jason Hart is a social anthropologist by training (BA, MA, Ph.D. University of London). He joined the University of Bath in September 2009 after seven years as a researcher and lecturer at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. He is also Visiting Lecturer at the Centre for Children’s Rights Studies, University of Geneva.

Much of Jason’s work has explored the experience of and institutional response to young people on the margins of society and the global economy. Themes such as protection, child rights, peacebuilding, home, militarisation and asylum have been central to this research. Much of his research has been undertaken in situations of political violence and displacement. Jason has worked in South Asia (Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Bhutan) and, increasingly, in the UK. However, his principal area of interest is the Middle East, particularly Israel/occupied Palestinian territories and Jordan.

Jason has been employed as a consultant author, researcher, evaluator and trainer by various UN, governmental and non-governmental organisations. These include UNICEF, Save the Children, PLAN, Care International, and the Canadian International Development Agency. He has also served as an advisor to the UN in the formulation of studies, guidelines and policies.
Speaker Biographies

Dr. Catherine Love, PhD, has conducted work that spans practice, policy and academic spheres. She is of New Zealand Maori (indigenous) descent, and has served as an elected member of her tribal governance entities for over twenty years. Formerly Director of Indigenous Research and Development at Victoria University of Wellington, Dr. Love moved from academia in 2005 to establish several innovative indigenous / endogenous economic and educational development initiatives. This included Ahikaa entrepreneurship education and the Ahikaa Accelerated Learning Centre. A long-time advocate for indigenous and endogenous supportive policies and practices, Dr. Love has taught and published internationally and has been a popular plenary speaker at social service, social policy, mental health and educational conferences. In 2012, she was identified as one of 130 “innovators and influencers” in the field of Systems of Child and Family Protection and Wellbeing. In 2014, she was appointed to the Steering Committee of the Global Social Services Workforce Alliance.
The following is a brief list of resources by academics, practitioners and activists critically examining colonialism, racism and patriarchy in international child protection and rights field. Please refer to the Institute’s Master Reference List for a complete list of resources.

INTERNATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION AND CHILD RIGHTS

Colonialism, Racism and Patriarchy in Child and Family Welfare Policies and Practices

• A Starter Reading List on How Child Welfare Policies Harm Black People, Families, and Communities (2020)


• Molly Schwartz, “Do We Need to Abolish Child Protective Services?” *Mother Jones* (December 10, 2020)

Where is the Community and Children's Voice in Child Rights and Protection?


Podcast episode - Black Families Matter: Ending the Family Regulation Systems (with Dorothy Roberts and Lisa Sangoi), We Be Imagining (July 2020)


• REJUVENATE, Learning from a Living Archive: Rejuvenating Child and Youth Rights and Participation.

### De-Politicizing and Politicizing International Children’s Rights and Protection

- Elevate Children Funders Group, Global Philanthropy Project and Sentiido, Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights (2021)


- Jason Hart (April 2016), TedTalk - Reclaiming Compassion, Rethinking Aid


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