Street and Working Children's Participation in Programming for their Rights[1]

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Abstract

This paper draws conceptual and practical lessons from the experiences of Butterflies Programme of Street and Working Children in Delhi, India, within the historical and political framework of child rights-participation focused work in South Asia. It creates space for children's own experiences, perceptions, and concerns as a central component of child-focused development work. Empowering street and working children to reflect upon their experiences, articulate their views, plan effective programs and advocate for their own rights will enable them to challenge the status quo regarding children's place and power in society.

The lessons are relevant to current academic discourse on the social construction of childhoods and to debates concerning good development practice with marginalized children. Preparing adults to listen to children can help minimize conflicts that may arise when street children advocate for their own rights due to disparities in power and differing perceptions among stakeholders (e.g., parents, police, non-government organizations). The paper also advocates for strategic approaches that build upon children's self esteem and give them access to key decision-makers.

Keywords: India; empowerment of children; paradigms of childhood; street children

Introduction

In the past decade a new paradigm for the study of children has been emerging (James and Prout 1990). Childhood is to be understood as a social construction. Childhood, children's relationships and cultures are worthy of recognition in their own right, and not just in respect to their social construction by adults. Children are active participants in the construction and determination of their own social lives, other people's lives and the societies in which they live. Furthermore, because children's experiences of childhood are diverse, childhood as a variable of social

analysis can never be entirely separated from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity (see James and Prout 1990).

This paper aims to stimulate discussion on current socio-political issues in childhood research, while advocating for an empowerment approach to work with street and working children. Ethnographic material from street work practice,[2] including street and working children's own views and experiences[3] is used to draw out issues that widen the child rights debate.

It has been described how "childhood is a latecomer on the social science scene in India" (Kumar 1993). Moreover, it is difficult to talk of an "Indian" or "South Asian" childhood in a sub-continent that is bristling with an exciting and challenging diversity. The experience of childhood is deeply embedded in the larger social matrix of the community, caste, tribe, and family. Therefore, understanding the phenomenon of childhood cannot be separated from an understanding of the context (see Raman 2000). Raman aptly points out that:

> *starting from the very right to be born to the perceptions of childhood, socialization and the transition to adulthood are context-determined..... The very definition of the selfhood, subjecthood and personhood is deeply scripted by the larger context. The impact of the macro-structures and processes operating at a wider societal level affect groups differentially determining the life-choices of groups and individuals* (Raman 2000, p. 12).

Drawing upon experiences of Butterflies, a grassroots non-government organization working for the empowerment of street and working children in Delhi, India, this paper is concerned with girls and boys who are surviving life in a particular geographic, socio-economic, political and cultural context. In recognition that children are social actors in their own right, whose views and perceptions need to be understood, this paper gives space for sharing child worker's own experiences, perceptions, reflections and concerns. Giving space for children's own views to be heard is a central component of child-focused development work which is concerned with bringing children into the foreground, so that their lives can be as clearly seen as those of adults (Boyden and Ennew 1997).

Listening to children's views and perspectives is particularly important if we wish to gain a greater understanding of the similarities and differences between different children's lives. In planning programs and policies for children it is important to recognize the diversity among children's life experiences, and to respond to children within their local community contexts.

A brief introduction to the context and the work of Butterflies will be given. Moreover, attempts will be made to place the discussions within a historical framework, highlighting certain trends and politics surrounding the emergence of child worker's participatory rights. Discussion will then focus on three key issues which provide a useful framework for analysis of our practice and implications for theory, policy and future practice in South Asia. These three key issues are:

1. Perceptions of children
2. Power
3. Value for diversity

Finally, suggestions for moving forwards towards our vision of children's empowerment shall be discussed.

The Context

> *There should be no poverty, but it has been created by the rich. Furthermore, the rich feel that they are superior to us just because they have money. As street children they consider us to be even more inferior and downtrodden, just because we don't live in a house, and because we have no-one to love us* (Beeru, rag picker, boy, age 14).

The gap between the rich and poor within, as well as between, countries and nations is deepening. In South Asia there appears to be a growing middle class whose rush for attainment of modern technologies and material goods, is only increasing an acceptance of the values of exploitation, which serves to perpetuate and worsen the scale of poverty. Influenced by economic development policies there are growing economic disparities and the dimensions of poverty are changing. While liberalization of the economy flourishes, human welfare is worsening.

Child labor is an accepted socio-economic reality in India. Estimates of child workers in India vary from the official government figure of 44 million, to 100 million which is an estimate from the non-government organization sector. However, at an ideological level concepts of childhood which are based on modern, Western constructions, have been globalized by the welfare activities of many international organizations, both governmental and non-governmental. In the twentieth century, childhood for the middle and upper classes in modern industrialized societies is seen as distinct from adulthood, and children are in need of protection from an adult world of work, politics, responsibility and sexuality. Yet, in Southern countries, as was the case in pre-industrial Europe and North America, many children work because they have to, and they are socialized through their working experience. They do not have the luxuries of "a golden age of childhood."

This paper is particularly concerned with the lives of street and working children living in urban centers. With the effects of ongoing structural adjustment programs and increasing rural to urban migration there are an increasing number of families living in poverty in our urban settings. Rapid urbanization has brought with it rapid growth in urban slums. In 1996 an estimated 100 million people were said to be living in urban slums in India (UNICEF 1998). Of the 37 million children who are living in urban poverty a substantial proportion of them are living in informal (illegal) settlements or other temporary situations which include living along railway lines, nullahs (drainage canals) and on the streets themselves. Products of family instability, violence, or economic circumstances, one guesstimate is that 18 million children live or work on the streets of India (Human Rights Watch 1996).

Working primarily in the informal sector as rag pickers, shoe-shiners, porters, assistants in tea stalls, restaurants, and hotels, the lives of street and working children are commonly characterized by exploitation, marginalization, and abuse. Largely unprotected by adults, children have to learn to survive in difficult circumstances, requiring the acquisition of new skills, and a high degree of resilience.

In the 1980s increasing publicity was given to the phenomenon of street children. In responding to the challenge of reaching out to street children, who clearly did not fit western notions of childhood, nor experience "golden age childhoods," some local NGOs developed new ways of working with children on the streets in ways which built upon their capacities. As street children became active partners in programming, new movements developed through which they were able to raise questions regarding their participation in society, in economic, social and political life.

The historical emergence of working children and adolescents (NATs)[4] as a category has been documented (see Ennew 1995; Cussianovich 1995). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has played a significant role in the emerging category of organized groups of working children. As reported by Ennew (1995),

> The crucial and novel aspect of the Convention for NATs is not Article 34, which is designed to protect children from economic exploitation, but Articles 12 and 15 that add a new dimension to children's rights. By insisting that children have rights to have their opinions taken into consideration and to form associations to assert their own interests, these articles add participation to the range of children's rights. ... This implies that working children and adolescents can once more have their contribution to society recognized and, what is more, opens the possibility for their voice to be heard (23-24).

Cussianovich (1995) encourages us to recognize the historical significance of NATs, not only due to their increasing numbers, but because they:

> [child workers and adolescents] lead us to fundamental questions about the explosion of poverty in the international economic order and the scandalous inequalities between and within the countries; because they raise questions about the model of development and about social and political value assigned to different social actors; because they invite us to rethink the culture of work and its role for building identity and dignity; because they force us to reconsider the concept of age as element besides gender, ethnicity and class (32).

Butterflies Programme
With an emphasis on empowering street and working children with the skills and knowledge to protect their rights as children and to help them develop as respected and productive citizens, Butterflies Programme began reaching out to street and working children on the streets of Delhi in 1988. A range of responses to the "street

children phenomenon" in India began to emerge in the late-seventies and eighties, including the development of full care institutions, day care centers and food programs. Within a socio-cultural context in which children are generally not listened to, most projects were designed by adults (as "adults know best") and were characterized by welfare or rehabilitation responses. However, fuelled by fundamental beliefs in democracy and children's capacity to participate, and inspired by alternative strategies in use in Latin America and West Africa based on the principles of democracy and children's participation, Butterflies Programme was founded with a vision of a movement of street and working children.

As opposed to a welfare (or charity) perspective which views street children primarily as victims or delinquents in need of basic services and rehabilitation, an empowerment approach views children as citizens of our society, with rights to survival, protection, development and participation. Through a team of street educators who make contact with children on the streets, the children are given information and knowledge about their rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is used as a major tool for ensuring Government and public accountability to the well-being of all vulnerable children.

> *In our meetings we have a chance to ask questions and get information* (Street boys at Jama Masjid and New Delhi Railway Station Butterflies contact points).

> *Through meeting with Butterflies educators I have come to know about my rights: my rights to education, to protection, to health and play. Before time I didn't even know I had rights. Now I have this information and I can do something* (Suraj, rag picker, age 13).

Children are encouraged to reflect critically on their current realities (e.g., the reasons why they ran away from home to live and work on the streets for their survival); to understand the structural and political factors that are involved; to organize themselves (e.g., through unionization); and to identify the decision-making bodies which need to be made aware of their realities.

> *I had a dream: I would study and then get a good job so that I could feed my mother, brother and sisters. I went to school but we did not learn much there. Master used to hit us as we couldn't afford good clothes or notebooks... so I stopped studying and came to Delhi city* (Hari, porter, age 16).

> *We on behalf of the Bal Mazdoor Union, have taken out rallies, we went to National Human Rights Commission [on Human Rights Day] and at that time they listened very carefully to us and expressed their sympathy and help* (*Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz* reporters).

Numbers of children on the streets are never constant; their lifestyle is peripatetic. Through a team of street educators[5] Butterflies is in contact with approximately 800 children at any one time, at nine "contact points"[6] in areas of Delhi where there is a

concentration of street and working children. Over 50 percent of these children participate regularly in non-formal education, health, saving scheme, recreation and other participatory activities.

The "Bal Sabha" (Children's Council) is the supreme body, and the guiding force and mechanism of Butterflies Programme. Once a month, representatives from each contact point come together for the Bal Sabha. The children elect a chair person who presides over the meeting. Each member is encouraged to share any agenda issues, and each of the outlined points is discussed. One of the literate children records the minutes and decisions. Most often, issues discussed are about police harassment, non-payment of wages, need for better jobs, wages, education, saving schemes, problems of gambling and drugs.

Responding to children's identifications of their needs, Butterflies has developed and implemented varied programs by street educators and health workers in partnership with the street and working children. These include: the non-formal education program, life skills education, the health program, vocational training, counseling (especially in supporting children to return to their families), saving schemes, distribution of identity cards, and picnics outings. The children have developed a number of their own collectives including: the Bal Mazdoor Union (Child Workers Union); *Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz* (*Child Worker Voice*, a wallnewspaper group), a health co-operative, a theatre group and a youth bank.

Most of these program activities are conducted directly on the streets with street and working children's genuine participation. Moreover, the Bal Sabha enables a forum where the children can speak and share their ideas as well as monitor and critique the programs and orientation of the organization.

> *In Fatehpuri, the Baghdar market is where I first came across the street educator or Bhaiye as we call him from Butterflies. Bhaiye comes to Fatehpuri every day to teach us. Slowly, I started attending the classes and started participating in other programs organized by Butterflies. Now I am one of the editors of the* Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz[7] *and an active member of the theatre group* (Beeru, rag picker, boy, age 14).

> *When we have any crisis we come together to have a meeting to look for a solution* (street boys at Connaught Place- Butterflies contact point).

Discussions at the contact points and at the Bal Sabha meetings enable children to discuss and share information that concerns their lives, to analyze various social and political events and decisions, and to work together towards collective action. Through the Bal Sabha children learn the principles of democracy (i.e. every person has a right to an opinion and freedom of expression; a consensus must be reached to take a final decision and that sometimes a compromise is needed).

Through the process of Bal Sabha we learn three important things. Firstly, we get motivated to unite for our rights. Secondly, we have come to understand the importance of our unity which is our biggest asset, our strength in front of which no-one can stand. And finally, it is our unity that will help us in defeating our exploiters (Beeru, rag picker, boy, age 14).

Perceptions of Children[8]
Children's participation involves complexities which require us to "deepen our perceptions" of what the construct of childhood means to the many different people in children's lives (Fuglesang and Chandler 1997). Perceptions of children inevitably affect the roles, responsibilities and behaviors that children are expected to take on in any one particular context, as well as the nature of adult-child relations, and how children are treated. Moreover, children's own perception of themselves and their peer group plays an interacting role in determining how children think and behave.

While reviewing relevant studies for the identification of questions for an inquiry of childhood in the Indian context, Kumar (1993) highlighted the nature of adult-child relations in the Indian socio-cultural context. One theme that emerged from several sources (e.g. Murphy, 1953; Anandalakshmy and Bajaj, 1981; and Bernstein, 1975) was that adult-child continuity has been a dominant feature of the child's cultural ethos. Adults and children are generally not separated in space, moreover, the handling or responsibility is often not age-related (Anandalakshmy 1982).

Street children live much of their lives in peer groups, largely without adult supervision, and thus have been described as children who are "out of place" (see Connolly and Ennew, 1996). However, despite the freedom that such life offers, their lives continue to be influenced by a wide range of adults.

The fourteenth issue of *Bal Mazdoor Ki Awaz* (*Child Worker's Voice*) wallpaper, which is produced by working children, focused on the question "what does the society think of us- the street and working children?" The editorial board reports:

> *While collecting people's views about us we came across lots of difficulties. Many times in answer to our question 'what do you think about children like us' we got slaps and had to listen to abuses, but still we talked to people around us- shopkeepers, employers, police and common men and all those who influence our lives in one way or the other.*

For example, when Pinto (rag picker, age 13) asked a shop keeper "What do you think about street children?" he said, "they all are beggars, when they work in my shop then I treat them as my servants, when they are picking rags on the streets in dirty condition them I think them to be thieves."

While trying to struggle for their own survival these children are frequently "scapegoated" as thieves and delinquents and treated unfairly as a result. Such images of street children have been perpetuated by the media, and strengthened

by governments and NGOs when their response to street children has been characterized by "criminalization" or "rehabilitation." The children have reported numerous cases of the police beating them, bribing them, locking them up in cells and harassing them. Moreover, the public generally remain passive on-lookers or supporters to such violations. It becomes apparent that legislations such as the Juvenile Justice Act 1986 in India remained ineffective if the law enforces themselves are violating the very same laws that are supposed to offer care and protection to children.

The impact of prevailing negative perceptions of street children and their desire to be treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve have been frequently vocalized by children during their Bal Sabha, *Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz* meetings, and varied collective and participatory action initiatives:

> *Why does every person hates us and trouble us? Are we children not part of the society, don't we have two hands, two feet, two eyes. After all what do they find so bad in us? Due to work we look dirty, we do not have a house, we do not have bedding and no one to take care of us- this is the reason isn't it?* (child workers, editors of *Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz*, 2000)

> *We want the people to leave us alone so that we can live our lives peacefully. We want them to stop labeling us as thieves, pickpockets and beggars....We should be treated with respect. Even we are human beings, we are not animals.* (Suraj, rag picker, boy, age 12).

> *One day I went to the government hospital as I had a high fever of over 100 degrees. However, because I was dirty and poor the doctors didn't want to look at me properly. Our educator had to convince these doctors to let me be admitted to the hospital* (Rakesh, rag picker, boy, age 13).

In the eyes of a large proportion of society, including policy makers and implementers, street children "disrupt the tranquility, stability and normality of society" (Glauser 1990, in van Beers 1996). Yet, until the general population begins to perceive and understand street children in a more positive light, as fellow human beings searching for similar dreams in very adverse conditions, these children's social reality cannot be significantly improved (Diversi 1998).

> *In the pretext of being labeled as 'child beggars' street children like us are being picked up off the streets and placed in prisons... The Government policy makers have taken the time to think about the 'Seva Kutti' and cleaning children off the streets, but they haven't thought about what they should do for the children's futures. They say 'clean the streets, clean the streets,' but they have no option but to put us in Government homes which are no good... Have they not forgotten about the Lajpat Nagar incident? Where a child was hung*

> *upside down and beaten to death. Does nobody really care about what*
> *happens to us?* (Yakub, child worker, age 16).

To change the population's perceptions of street children, it is necessary to transform these children' personal troubles into public issues (Mills, 1959). Through strategies of empowerment and mobilization of street and working children, children themselves can play an active role in sharing their narratives about their lived experiences, thus, challenging dominant narratives about who street children are.

> *"We do not have any money at home. Papa is very old. My younger*
> *brother and sister have their expenses as well, so I pick rags. I do not*
> *know where the Government school is. It is not one in our community.*
> *Even if there is a school where will the money come to look after my*
> *brother and sister?"* (Hameeda, rag picker, girl age, 10).

> *Where I stay in Jama Masjid there is widespread sexual abuse, but the*
> *police doesn't intervene. The police know what is going on, but they do*
> *nothing except take bribes* (Yakub, child worker, boy, age 16).

Dialogue and encouragement of "critical enquiry" by children helps them to understand power relations, to challenge negative perceptions held against them and to assert their rights as children and as human beings.

> *We should be treated as human beings. We should not be*
> *discriminated against. People should talk to us with the same kind*
> *tone that they talk to other children* (Beeru, rag picker, boy, age 14).

> *The police shouldn't stop and harass us... they should learn to talk to*
> *us properly. If we want to ask them for information then we should*
> *have the right to do so....We are children and even we have a lot of*
> *rights* (Suraj, rag picker, boy, age 12).

> *It is not good to have two kinds of schools, private and public. They*
> *are rich but so what, we are children too and should be educated.*

By listening to children's interpretations of their roles and relationships, as well as to how members of society view them and treat them, we can learn much about the nature of children's childhoods in any particular context. Moreover, in considering the range and complexity of children's relationships with different groups of adults it becomes clear that children take on a myriad of relationships and roles, and behave differently in relation to different adults in different local settings who impinge upon their lives. For example, the quotes below illustrate how different adults perceive street and working children as money earners, as objects for sexual gratification, as criminals, as beggars or as victims.

> *If a child sits at home then parents think of him as a burden because*
> *he is eating and not earning. Therefore, the child is sent out either to*

beg or to work...The parent may say 'you won't get any food this evening, unless you go and earn some money for yourself...' My parents wouldn't allow me to study- they wanted me to work" (Afroz, rag picker, age 13 years).

In Delhi there are many video halls which shows cheap films...there are both adults and children therefore during blue films the grown ups get hold of the children for sex. Due to fear children do not object, even if they do and ask for help no one helps them... (editors of *Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz*).

Some of the men in shops say 'come in girl and collect this rubbish'. Then when we go in they will shut the door behind us and try to abuse us (Rag picker, girl, age 12).

If other NGOs try to lure us by giving free food and clothes they hurt our self-respect, as they consider us beggars (street children, Bal Sabha meeting).

We should be differentiated from beggars, as we are earning our own livelihoods, working hard to support ourselves. The Magistrate should see the difference between child workers and beggars, but they don't because they don't listen to us (Amin, rag picker, boy, age 14).

In order to understand the complexities and conflicts that street children face, we must consider the differing perspectives of childhood held by the various stakeholders in their lives (e.g. parents, police, employers, community members, NGO workers, the judiciary, government agencies and international agencies).

Such perceptions and treatment are further affected by other variables, such as children's gender, religion, ethnicity and caste. For example, entrenched notions of caste dictate that children from lower caste families are expected to work rather than to study. Likewise, girls may be expected to work, while their brothers attend schools. Furthermore, in a cultural context in which girls are expected to exist primarily in private, not public spaces, girls working on the streets face additional sexual harassment as they are perceived as "public property" merely by their circumstances of living and/or working on the street.

Since we are living on the streets we are considered 'available'... Sometimes we don't have any choice... we are molested and abused (girls who work as rag pickers at Kashmeri Gate).

In most cases boys are beaten up, while the girls are sexually harassed and abused by men (child workers, editors of *Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz*).

The implications of such differing expectations need to be addressed in practice, policy developments and in re-constructing theories of childhood. Mayall (1994)

suggests that the level of children's powerlessness varies according to how the adults in specific social settings conceptualize children and childhood. Thus, there is a need to address dynamics of power, to enable access and space for children to be citizens for social change, to value diversity and to work constructively with conflict.

Power

> *Our study is not complete as we are not united as yet* (Salim, porter, boy, age 14).

By empowering street and working children to reflect upon their experiences, articulate their views, plan effective programs and advocate for their own rights, these children are challenging the *status quo* regarding children's place and power in society. Conflicts will arise when children advocate for their own rights, due to differing socio-cultural perceptions of childhood among varied stakeholders. Relations between adults and children are regulated by power and interests (Qvortrup 1994). While many of the "supposed differences" between children and adults may be socially constructed, adult power over children "means that merely in relation to adult's praxis...children have no claim on equal treatment because they are not old enough" (Qvortrup 1994, 4). Civic institutions and the adult world with its power relations are, by and large, inimical to children's participation (Fuglesang and Chandler 1997).

In the early 1990s Butterflies NGO was criticized by various NGOs and international organizations for supporting the development of working children's unions, since this was contrary to the movement against child labor at that time. However, alliances with existing working children's movements in Latin America and West Africa provided solidarity. Over time, there has been a change in discourse regarding children's right to association and to form collectives and there has been increased acceptance and support of Butterflies' position (Invernizzi and Milne (in press)). The word "union" remains a loaded term, however, with negative connotations for many.

Working directly with children to give them space and encouragement to speak up for themselves, to organize themselves and to work together to find collective solutions to overcome their difficulties, is important but it is not enough:

> *We have tackled issues like police violence- we have had protests for many years, but what has changed? We have little power* (street boy at Jama Masjid contact point).

Children must be seen as integral members of the community. There is a crucial need to sensitize adults to be willing to share power, otherwise children can have little influence and may become disillusioned. In working towards children's empowerment it is crucial that we carry out preparatory work with adults who are part of children's lives (e.g., parents, employers, community members, police), while also working for change in the institutional and social environments to open up access and opportunities for children to participate (in local, national and international decision-making forums).

Furthermore, in working towards systemic change conflict is inevitable. Thus, as facilitators of change processes we need to be alert, able to exercise good judgment, resolve differences and nurture relationships, in order that we may work sensitively and creatively with conflict (see Guijit and Kaul Shah 1998).

> *Butterflies strives the most to make adults talk to children more gently and treat them in a better manner. Another important thing Butterflies does is in the field of advocacy. They do this by meeting and discussing with various political parties, the Government and other influential people, about our problems... Meetings between them and us children are also arranged* (child workers, editors of *Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz*).

Furthermore, it is also imperative that we address the disparities of power amongst children (e.g. due to age, gender, caste, disability, or language). Considering additional discrimination faced by certain groups, such as girls, children with disabilities, or younger children, we must continuously endeavor to make our participative processes and opportunities inclusive and accessible for smaller voices to be heard. It has been suggested that "exploring cultural models of difference and the ways in which these are used to create inequalities can make space for sensitization about prejudice and discrimination as an integral part of the participatory process" (Cornwell 1998, 56). Children should be encouraged to celebrate differences amongst them, to challenge discrimination and to work together co-operatively and democratically in a manner that transforms and challenges much of their existing experiences of exploitative relations.

Value of Diversity

Participatory research in Butterflies has highlighted the importance of recognizing and responding to difference (see O'Kane and Sen 2001). For example, while listening to children's perspectives regarding which rights were most crucial to them, we found there were significant differences between the views expressed by children at our different contact points. These differences reflected the differences in their ages, experiences, life situations, genders and family characteristics.

For example, while acknowledging the varied forms of exploitation and negative influences that they faced in their local areas (e.g. drugs, sexual exploitation, economic exploitation) children's responses were context specific. Moreover, street boys who were living on the streets (without families) placed more emphasis on the importance of friendships and rights to association, as opposed to child workers who were living with their families, who placed more emphasis on rights to a home. Overall, girls placed most significance on the importance of right to a home.

There is no singular construct of a "street child" that cuts across caste, class, gender, and ethnicity. Groups of children living and working on the street differ in their characteristics between continents, countries, cities, and even within the same urban areas, so that it is impossible to generalize about the "typical street child" (Aptekar 1998; Connolly 1990; Espinola et al. 1988; Wright et al. 1993). Existing

research indicates that children rooted in their own culture retain many positive values and assets despite prolonged deprivation. We need to focus on the strengths and resilience of children. Thus, in program planning there is a fundamental need to value diversity, to search for it and respond to it. Such an approach will lead to richer, more innovative, responsive programming for children living in varied contexts.

The UNCRC has been criticized for its western bias (ethnocentrism, imposition of individual, autonomous rights versus collective, societal responsibilities) but it can remain a useful tool in working with diversity if the key principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are taken seriously, namely: non-discrimination, best interests of the child, inherent right to life and the importance of hearing the child's voice.

When we accept that no child, regardless of gender, religion, caste, ethnicity, should be discriminated against or denied fundamental rights, we can gain an understanding of the complexities of local contexts by listening to children's voices. The concept of the "best interests" of the child is "best appreciated by locating it in the wider social and economic matrix of any community" (Fuglesang and Chandler, 1997). Indeed, if the key principles are adhered to, the UNCRC provides a powerful tool through which discussion on childhood can be re-opened.

Moving Forwards

While responding to the needs of street children, the relationship between children and their families, communities, nations and the wider international system need to be understood. Critical questions regarding the status of girls and boys and children's rights need to be asked. A dynamic policy framework is needed which ensures shared responsibility of governments, non-governmental organizations and civil society to mobilize and pool resources to enable fulfillment of children's rights.

Government organizations must be enabled to address all street children's practical needs, enabling their access to quality education, housing and health care. Furthermore, strategic efforts to address the fundamental causes of children's powerlessness (arising due to age and compounded by other factors such as gender, caste, and ethnicity) need to be addressed.

While working at local levels with children to enable fulfillment of all children's needs and rights (e.g., education, protection, health, good standard of living, and recreation), approaches to work must be based in a broader framework which builds upon opportunities for awareness-raising, training, bolstering identity and self-esteem, participation and organizing. Furthermore, parallel work at more strategic levels to increase children's access to adult decision-making forums at local, district, regional, national and international levels needs to be conducted.

Listening to children's voices provides a starting point for project planning which is child-centered and context-specific. Moreover, children and young people's participation is a democratizing process, which enables the status of children and children's voices to increase. When supported and given real access to decision-

making power children can become a force for social change. Increasingly, the voices of child workers are being heard at local, national and international meetings. The inclusion of children's voices has not only challenged existing pre-conceived notions of childhood, but has forced powerful members of adult communities to recognize the macro-economic trends that impact negatively on the lives of children and their families and perpetuate local and global inequalities.

Endnotes

1. This paper is based on a paper presented during the Child Rights Panel: "Conflict or Convergence? Exploring the Extent to Which South Asian Cultural Perspectives Are Embraced within Child-focused Development Discourse and Practice" at the European Modern South Asian Studies Group, 16th Conference, 5-9 September 2000, University of Edinburgh, UK. At the time, I was working as a program officer with Butterflies Programme of Street and Working Children in Delhi, India. I would like to acknowledge its staff and thank its Director, Ms. Rita Panicker, for her encouragement in developing this paper. For further information concerning Butterflies, please contact her at Butterflies@vsnl.com.
2. The author worked as a street educator with Butterflies on the streets of Delhi from 1998-2001.
3. Children's views shared in this paper were expressed by street and working children during a variety of children's forums including their regular monthly "Bal Sabha" (Children's Council) meetings; their wallnewspaper meetings; and/or during participatory research projects which were regularly facilitated by the street educators as part of their program work.
4. NATs refers to *ninos adolescents trabajadores* -Spanish for child and adolescent workers, the term being initiated in Latin America where one of the first movements of working children started.
5. Locally employed adults with a commitment to social justice and participatory work with children.
6. A "contact point" is used to refer to an area where there are a concentration of street and working children where the street educators regularly meet the children. "Contact points" include the bus terminal, railway station, market places and parks.
7. *Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz* is the *Child Workers Voice* wallnewspaper group. A group of street and working children bring out a wall newspaper on issues affecting them every three months.
8. By different stakeholders.

Claire O'Kane *is a qualified social worker and has experience of participatory and empowering work with marginalized children and young people in Asia and the UK. She worked as Programme Officer with Butterflies Programme of Street and Working Children in Delhi, India from 1998-2001. She then worked with Save the Children Alliance in South and Central Asia as a coordinator of a regional initiative on "Children's Citizenship and Governance." Claire is currently working for Save the Children UK as a Child Rights Advisor in Afghanistan.*

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