EDITORIAL
Globalization and children

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It seems as if the latest academic *chic* is the term 'globalization'. Add that word to a research or seminar paper or a list of research interests and one's efforts take on a special luster. The term 'globalization' can be a used as a cheap flavor enhancer. It can also be used as an explanatory principle – an explanation that is brought into play when all other explanations fail. But globalization also describes forces that have produced enormous changes in the lives of children.

How seriously should child researchers take the term and how should it affect the way they think about their work? Despite many legitimately different definitions of globalization we can construct a working definition that allows us to focus on some major impacts of global change on children. Globalization is a process that opens nation-states and societies to many influences that originate beyond their borders. These changes are likely to decrease the primacy of national economic, political and social institutions thereby affecting the everyday context in which children grow up and interact with the rest of society. Some of the impacts of globalization on children are therefore normative.

The effects of globalization can be as varied as its constituent characteristics. Liberating private enterprise from government control or regulation and promoting international trade may bring rising living standards for the many or the few. In some countries rising gross domestic product (GDP) has brought better health care and education for children. But while poverty rates have decreased in some countries, worldwide, the actual number of people living in poverty increased by 100 million in the 1990s (Stiglitz, 2002a: 5). Moreover, there is growing income inequality both in many countries and between northern and southern tier countries. The price of entry into some internationally competitive industries is unaffordable for many countries, and this reality has enormous consequences for the work and wage opportunities of young people.

Several analyses suggest that the International Monetary Fund's policy of encouraging developing countries to open their capital markets to free flows of short-term foreign investments in the early 1990s led to the

currency crises that dominated the rest of the decade (Blecher, 1999). Some countries have recovered from those crises and some have not. Other voices suggest that the restrictions the IMF and others impose on borrowing countries exacerbate those countries' problems. George Soros, a master of exploiting the weakness of developed as well as developing countries' currencies, now makes the critical point that globalization has distorted the allocation of resources in favor of private goods at the expense of public goods thus weakening basic health, education, transportation and safety-net services (Soros, cited in Stiglitz, 2002b). These services directly affect the lives of children. They are the key non-familial determinants of who will make it. Such reallocation of resources has occurred in some wealthy countries as well as in developing countries.[1]

The development of global communications could, in theory, produce an equalization of the influence or cultural power between highly and less highly developed economies. But some argue that in practice global communications give a competitive cultural advantage to these few countries with highly developed communications industries and hence heavily slant the influences to which children will be exposed.

This brief summary of the term 'globalization' shows what powerful changes are caused by the phenomenon, and how complex and how varied their likely impacts on children. Those complexities raise a lot of challenges for child researchers in any country. One challenge is the tension between the particular and the general, between that part of the world of children the researcher is exploring and the larger forces that affect that microcosm. It is hard to study the appalling conditions of children in sub-Saharan Africa where in some countries 17 percent of newborns do not live to the age of 5, without considering the local and the international political and economic contexts that make that situation so difficult (Sengupta, 2002). Put simply, a responsible researcher must grapple with the range of forces, local, national and international that created the situation and makes its resolution so difficult. This is a complex intellectual task. The task also demands even-handed political analysis. One has to balance the multiple effects of trade agreements, deregulation and the policies of international corporations and the world's most powerful economies. One also has to consider the consequences of the degree of competence and honesty of local political elites in creating the conditions children inhabit. And those human forces play out in the context of different natural endowments that leave some countries bereft of natural resources or suffering from crises of drought, earthquakes and flooding.

Just as complicated as describing the condition of children is the task of figuring out what should be done. The UN Millennium Goals for children set out concrete improvements in such areas as infant and maternal mortality, child poverty and child labor. While the steps to some of those goals are comparatively clear, the steps may not be easy to implement. And the most

effective ways to achieve other goals are still not well understood. Moreover, what is to be done when the cultural beliefs of a society are in conflict with possible solutions? One such conflict played out in the recent struggle in the UN Special Session on Children as the anti-abortion views of the US and some Muslim countries almost prevented agreement on the critical issue of reproductive rights.

Researchers who wallow in global complexity are not likely to produce much useful work, but those who see only the local are likely to miss much of what influences the ground they are examining. We must work with a variety of lenses at the same time and deal with the resulting confusions as honestly and creatively as we can.

There is yet one more challenge – not to lose sight of the children themselves. To our shame, not listening to children is a sin of commission as well as omission. The right-wing objection in the US to including children in debates about their lives put the US in the company of Somalia as the only countries not ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In May 2002, Somalia finally signed the UN Convention; thus, the US is the only country that has not officially supported this document. (While any country has a range of views about children, official and unofficial US opinions are particularly important because of that country's extraordinary economic, political and cultural influence[2]). In New Zealand, by contrast, the government organized a consultation with children and young people to elicit their views on their condition.

Children won't be good informants about the consequences of NAFTA or decisions made by the IMF. But they will be the best, though still fallible, informants about what it is like to grow up in the Mississippi Delta, the slums of Bombay, or the favelas of Sao Paulo and how hard it is to make it to the adult world relatively unscathed and with a chance for a decent life. These children's life stories will remind us why we have an intellectual and a moral responsibility to summon all our energies to analyze those forces and conditions which leave so many children behind.

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Notes

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1. The New Zealand economic historian David Thomson demonstrates the shifting of resources from young families with children to the middle-aged and elderly in most western societies. His argument is cited in Smith et al. (2000: Ch. 1).

2. The US has, however, taken an important role in advancing the international agenda to improve the condition of children in such areas as the extension of primary education and efforts to combat childhood diseases.

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