



AGENTS OF CHANGE: CHILDREN IN DEVELOPMENT

As we enter the 21st century, renewed attempts are being made worldwide to recognize the central role that children play in international development. These efforts stand against the backdrop of past failures. Most indicators show that the world has failed to provide large numbers of children with the basic conditions necessary to achieve full human development and to lead productive lives. Nowhere is this more evident than in developing countries.

The 1980s have brought about the disturbing realization that economic growth and social modernization in many Third World countries have not yet engendered the changes in attitudes and practices necessary to recognize children as an important part of the development process. Conventional efforts to respond to children's essential needs have too often been costly in their implementation, inefficient in their delivery, and inappropriately suited to people's demands at the grass-roots level.

Traditional attempts to provide for children have frequently focused on improving children's basic health, nutrition, shelter, and education on a sectoral basis to secure minimal conditions for physical survival. Many of these efforts spring from welfare or remedial notions that attempt to compensate for the inadequacies of the social systems in place in many countries. In essence, governments of many developing countries have relied on weak social safety nets.

Children today remain one of the most vulnerable social groups to the failures and contradictions of governments' policies and actions. Narrowly defined strategies to mitigate children's suffering still lead to relief interventions, simplistic aid programs, and poorly designed innovations. Children continue to be passive depositories of social assistance rather than dynamic agents of change.

Statistics on underdevelopment only give a glimpse of the dramatic impact of poverty on children's lives. Today, millions of children are condemned to live in conditions of extreme poverty, malnutrition, ill health, illiteracy, and total exclusion from the benefits of economic growth. One out of three children in the developing world — about 180 million of them — suffers from serious malnutrition. Most are in countries that could be food

Almost 3 million children die every year from a lack of basic health care, most from preventable diseases and poor delivery of services. More than 100 million children of primary school age are not in school, 60 million of which are girls. An estimated 40% of the children who began school in 1990 will drop out before completing a minimum of 4 years of education that at most will qualify them to enlarge the files of the informal sector.

While children's conditions of life deteriorate, the developing world devotes half of its total annual expenditures to maintaining military forces and servicing debts — totalling more than US\$325 billion by the end of the 1980s. Debt and interest payments from the Third to the industrialized world are three times as much as the aid received and results in a net outflow of capital to the northern

hemisphere of more than US\$20 billion a year. This amount is sufficient to cover the human expenditures per capita of all children living in poverty for the first 5 years of their lives.

When international financial institutions reduced their aid flows, increased aid conditionality, and pressured Third World countries to limit state social spending programs for poverty alleviation, infant death rates increased 25% in the countries most heavily in debt. Most governments in Africa, Latin America

and the poorest countries of Asia are allocating less today to social programs than they did in the mid 70s. In this period, government spending in education in developing countries has dropped by almost 3% compared to the early 70s. Spending per head in schools declined by almost 25% in the 37 poorest countries of the world.



self-sufficient but must sell their food in the international market to cope with their debt payments. In 1989, Unicef estimated that in a period of 12 months half a million children die in the developing world as a direct result of slowdowns or reversals in economic development.

Entangled in Their Own Interpretations

Although the figures showing the fate of children are staggering, some international organizations and donor agencies, entangled in their own interpretations of the world, continue to doubt the value of education as a distinct strategic development concern and, instead, shift priorities toward more politically profitable areas of research. Official development aid for basic services such as education dropped by about 6.5% between the 1970s and the 1980s.

Efforts to address children's basic learning needs remain narrowly concentrated in the provision of primary schooling. Early childhood development between birth and 6 years of age and the fate of children after they complete basic education remain peripheral issues among many international donors. Although evidence shows that a 1% increase in female literacy is three times more effective in reducing infant mortality than a similar increase in the number of doctors, women's education has still not been fully achieved.

Despite these overwhelming statistics, efforts to improve the life of children do not necessarily or exclusively mean more money. Instead, the issues often involve political participation, empowerment, and well-informed decisions. Greater equality in resource distribution, a stronger knowledge base for this distribution of resources, and the political will to allocate resources fairly are all part of meeting the demands of people at the grass-roots level. National and international decision-makers must realize that programs which are not culturally appropriate will likely fail. Externally designed visions of the world cannot remain as the driving force in the allocation of resources for human development.

Experiences in low-income developing countries show that essential maternal and child health services can be made available at a cost of US\$5 per person per year. The most common health needs of the poor can be met by community health workers whose training may cost



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between 120 and 600 times less than the training of a fully qualified doctor. Experiences in education suggest that the cost of primary school for all 6-11 year olds works out to an average cost of US\$25 per child per year. Piped water supply and basic sanitation can be made available for an annual US\$6 per person. If these estimates are correct, the question emerges: what factors continue to prevent donors and governments in recipient countries from ensuring appropriate conditions for the development of children?

A combination of factors point to some reasons: a lack of sound policy decisions, the predominance of market-based structural adjustment programs, and a lack of basic conditions for the participation and empowerment of the poor in decision-making. With the breakdown of prevailing models of development, there is today an urgent need to revisit the basic notions and assumptions guiding the ways in which societies and the international community see the role of children in development.

The understanding of a child's development as an integral, permanent, and interactive process requiring multidimensional approaches to problem-solving is only recently becoming a reality. Efforts to empower local schools and parents and to involve children in their own human development still reflect the comfortable rhetoric of international politics rather than the urgency of satisfying basic human needs. Notions of community participation and empowerment still rest on global and simplistic understandings of the relations of power in societies where decisions in politics and economics are reserved for the privileged few.

Initiatives Proven to Work

If child development is hampered by shrinking world resources, how can development decisions result in low-cost innovations and equitable solutions to the perennial problems affecting children?

The answer perhaps can be found in experiences that have been proven to work. Although they cannot be presented as building blocks of success, research initiatives supported by IDRC in developing countries over the last two decades reveal creative

alternatives and solutions designed by developing countries themselves. Applied research, when used to empower people to seek low-cost solutions to their own problems, plays a key role in building the knowledge base necessary to better children's lives. For policymakers and educators it can also contribute to developing reliable indicators, achieving low-cost methods for data gathering and analysis, and finding improved ways of accessing this information. But, above all, research can indicate to donors, relief organizations, and policymakers what programs and innovations work in the most cost-effective and culturally appropriate manner.

A feature common to IDRC-related research experiences is their focus on the children themselves as agents of their education and as potential actors in development. In these projects, there is a shared assumption: when children and communities play an active role in their own social well-being, tangible and effective results often follow. The child-centred approach, however, requires moving beyond strategies that rest on narrowly defined programs of social assistance or naive perceptions of popular political participation.

Some preconditions are required for these types of innovations to succeed. They must be developed on the basis of an understanding of the learning patterns of children, the factors influencing their lives, the roles they play in their families, and the social and cultural values that may prevent or facilitate the involvement of children in becoming agents of change. As such, any projects must be driven by multisectoral and multidisciplinary views of human development. Right from the planning stage, there must also be means for monitoring and evaluation to identify areas of success and failure quickly. Finally, every project must be realistic in its assessment about the tangible power of change that participatory and community-based approaches may have vis-à-vis the role of existing institutions in the civil society and at

the state level. If these preconditions are met, effective political actions can be taken to facilitate the success of child-centred innovations and programs.

Specific Projects

Researchers with Aga Khan Foundation projects in India have shown how health education programs have raised not only children's awareness of the benefits of correct hygiene behaviour in the household but also that of siblings and parents. This "child-to-child" approach is a cost-effective innovation geared toward teaching children better health, nutrition, and child development practices. The lesson of the approach is simple: child-centred and participatory activities can, in many cases, promote learning more effectively than traditional educational methods.

The direct involvement of poor, disadvantaged children in providing information about the conditions affecting them most has also proven to be an effective tool in integrating children into the development process. Low-cost and easy-to-handle information bases can make the delivery and monitoring of social services easier and more efficient. Firsthand, readily available data on conditions that facilitate or hamper the effectiveness of children's health, nutrition or education programs is one area requiring primary research attention. The project in Uruguay with the Inter-American Children's Institute is a step forward in bridging this gap.

Understanding the way in which traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural practices affect early childhood development can lead to the production of simple educational tools and materials for use by the family and in preschool settings. The Colombian Centre of Research and Child Development, CIDIE, investigated traditional education practices in Andean countries with the aim of developing an alternative approach to nonformal education. The outcome was a guide with a compilation of children's games adapted to stimulate cognitive, affective, and motor development of preschool-age children from peasant

and indigenous communities. Understanding the factors that cause families to view young children as an integral part of their income-earning strategies, can also help teachers and school authorities to review their assumptions about children's achievements and failures in primary education.

One project in particular reveals the beneficial effects of the organized involvement of the family and the community in children's education. An innovation developed in Chile by the Centre for the Study and Services of Children and Women, CEANIM, shows that communities, working in collaboration with preschool teachers, can be an effective agent in the organization, management, and delivery of preschool programs. This project has led to the establishment of community-based preschools in marginal urban areas run by members of the children's families.

The common characteristic of all these projects is that they place children at the centre of their own development and view children as a means to influence the behaviours and attitudes of their households and communities. Ultimately, these experiences show that children are the key to their own education and development.

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