

Not the last word: point and counterpoint

On the subject of children Children are the best people to tell us what is wrong with child welfare

Chris Goddard

Family planning is still a problem for some countries and organizations. In other countries, where there is a general decline in fertility and families become smaller, childhood is changing. Where families are wealthy enough, childhood and education lengthen. The WorldForum'98: Justice for Children, held in Manila in November, gave Filipino children the opportunity to say what needs to change. The agenda produced by them is a model that other agencies in other countries could usefully follow.

Chris Goddard would like to thank the children and young people who attended WorldForum'98 in Manila for permission to reproduce their Problems and Recommendations.

My 'Lonely Planet' guide to the Philippines informed me that 'Filipinos are inclined to be very fond of children and have an average six children to a family' (1997, 6th edition, p.27). There are children everywhere in the Filipino capital, selling sweets and single cigarettes at the roadside, acting as conductors on the highly-decorative jeepney taxis, and playing naked while dodging the dense traffic in the backstreets.

Metro Manila, made up of Manila and its suburbs, is said to have a population far in excess of ten million. One welfare worker told me that there are more than 250,000 homeless families in that figure, so it's not surprising that the children are so visible. Imagine how many homeless children there must be. As Asia's only Roman Catholic country, children face many religious and cultural obstacles when it comes to family planning.

The Filipinos are not the only ones who have some difficulties with family planning. Organisations as well as countries have struggled with the issue. In her book, *Children First: The Story of UNICEF, Past and Present*, Maggie Black (1996) describes how UNICEF was keen to avoid being openly linked with promoting the use of contraceptives out of fear of the possible cultural and religious controversies. According to Black, UNICEF was often criticised for failing to adequately promote family planning (1996: 208-9).

Family planning makes a major contribution to both maternal and child health, as Black explains in her book. Citing a UNICEF policy review on family planning, she stresses that reductions in infant mortality and in fertility have a 'powerful synergistic effect':

...smaller family size improved the prospects of child survival, and improved child survival motivated couples to want fewer children. (1996:210)

In the meantime, however, there are many children and young people in need of more immediate help.

The first chapter of Black's book, *Children: A Cause Comes of Age*, opens with the following sentence:

Not long ago, the idea of statesmen sitting at a conference table to discuss the well-being of children would have been greeted with amazement, if not with derision. (1996:1)

Dr Chris Goddard teaches Social Work at Monash University where he is Director, Child Abuse and Family Violence Research Unit. He is also Research Officer with Australians Against Child Abuse. Contact address: Monash University, Clayton, Vic 3168.

Black argues that children are not only in the news, but they are the news:

Children are among the real issues of the day, en masse and as individuals. Child safety, child survival, child health; child victims of violence and warfare; child heroes, child criminals; school children; street children, marginalized children, girl children, abused and displaced children - the list goes on and on. (1996:3)

Black asks why children are now the focus of so much public attention. Part of the answer, she suggests, is the general decline in fertility. As families become smaller, Black argues, so 'each child is more precious' (1996:4). I have always thought there is something rather patronising in such arguments, suggesting as they do that those who have more children somehow have less invested in each child.

Certainly Black is right when she notes that where parents have sufficient resources, childhood is growing longer, with more years of education and delayed entry into the workforce. It is still not clear, however, whether this means that we are concerned for all children, or whether those with the financial ability are becoming more protective of their own offspring.

In countries like the Philippines (or in parts of our own large cities, for that matter), it is hard to believe that our attitudes to other people's children have changed much. In Metro Manila, I was assured by welfare workers, it is possible to buy children for sex for little more than an Australian dollar. Children are more expensive for the men who prey on them in Australian cities but the sexual exploitation of children continues apace.

John O'Neill is a sociologist who seeks to advocate the cause of children. He writes that:

Children do not do well among us. We treasure them and we trash them. We love them and we beat, starve and overwork them. We prey upon them while demanding that they trust us. There is no time in human history and no human society where children have not experienced both good and evil at the hands of adults. (1997:241)

O'Neill proposes that we are both 'sentimental and cruel' towards our fellow humans, not just towards children.

In countries like the Philippines our cruelty towards each other is more visible. There are more people, living closer together, more homeless adults and children on the streets. Much of the abuse of children in Australia is hidden. In countries like the Philippines, our compassion is sorely tested by the sight of so many in so much need.

Sznaider (1997) argues that compassion is more than the 'passive observation' of the distress of others:

Compassion involves feeling sorrow for the suffering of others accompanied by a moral demand to alleviate this pain. (1997:223)

No matter how compassionate one feels, it is hard to know how to respond to repeated multiple exposures to cruelty to

children. Those working in the child welfare area in such countries face challenges that we can barely imagine.

World Forum '98: Justice for Children, run by the International Forum for Child Welfare and the Consuelo Zobel Alger Foundation was held in Manila last November, and that was what took me to the Philippines. There is always a strange incongruity about such conferences, about discussions of child poverty taking place in a five-star hotel. Manila's Edsa Shangri-La Hotel provided the cool air and quiet surroundings that made a strong contrast to the noise and humidity outside its doors.

Dinners at such conferences provide even starker contrasts. While delegates dine on 'clear seafood soup with mussels, squid, fish fillet and shrimps flavoured with lemon grass', for example, there is likely to be discussion of UNICEF's work in Asia. The 'Leche flan with ube macapuno ice cream on poppy seed meringue and chocolate leaf presented with fruit coulis' may be followed by accounts of the lives of street children. I am not exaggerating. Two former child labourers spoke after one such dinner. One described how he had been forced to work 12 hours a day on a pig farm, and was paid 80 Philippine pesos (little more than three Australian dollars) for a day's work. Half of his wages had to be paid back for his food. The food was often rotten, he said, as we rounded off our meals with coffee and beautiful imported chocolates.

In making these observations, I am not being especially critical of the conference organisers. Similar conferences on similar themes in equally luxurious surroundings occur on a regular basis in Australia and elsewhere. Such events provide child welfare workers with the opportunity to share experiences with others in the field, learn of new programs, and provide a welcome and deserved break from the pressures of work. Perhaps it is another function of such occasions to make adults feel awkward.

Ultimately such occasions must be judged by what they achieve. One achievement of the *Justice for Children* conference was the attendance of the Vice President of the Philippines, the Hon. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, an important recognition of the work of the agencies involved.

The major achievement of the conference, however, lay in the role of children and young people themselves. Children and young people presented their own ideas about what needs to change in the systems that they have had contact with. The problems and solutions speak for themselves, and the document is reproduced as the children presented it (see following page).

It is interesting to compare this document, produced by the Filipino children and young people, with the products of many Australian conferences, drafted by adults. The language of the children and young people is clear and the sentences are short and to the point. 'Brutality' and 'covering up' are called just that, and not re-written in words chosen to cause the least offence and in longer sentences intended to lose their meanings.

Problems with Law Enforcers	Recommendations
No action on our complaints	Implement/create Children's Desk that will attend to our concerns
Ask for a bribe before acting	Upgrade salary structure of law enforcers Remove the organization law enforcers found guilty of extortion/bribery
Brutality against children, abuse of authority	Impose sanctions/remove from office those found guilty.
Non-compliance/violation of laws concerning violating Children's Rights	Remove from office those found guilty of violating Children's Rights
Covering up cases that involve influential people/relatives	Seek media assistance to expose cases of cover-up. Government to ensure and monitor punishment/sanction of abusive and corrupt law enforcers. Educate law enforcers regarding Children's Rights. Let this be included in the police academy curriculum.
That the WorldForum should prepare a Manifesto to be submitted to the UN empowering it to impose sanctions on signatory countries who ignore or violate the rights of Children.	

Problems with the Prosecution System	Recommendations
We do not understand the role/function of the Prosecution System	Mobilize/deputize concerned agencies as well as the Education Department to educate children regarding the Prosecution System
Not enough lawyers who are sympathetic and available to represent children who don't have money.	That the justice department and concerned NGO's network and share resources to provide legal assistance to children in need. That the prosecution system will be 'child-friendly'.

Problems with the Courts	Recommendations
Children being prosecuted like adults.	That there will be an establishment of juvenile courts whose judges, staff, and lawyers are 'child sensitive' and friendly.
Forced to plead guilty to speed-up court proceedings.	Ensure that the courts give the child the right to speak up before the judge and not to be threatened.
Language barrier	That the court proceedings be conducted in the language we understand or that it provide an interpreter.

Problems with the Correction/Rehabilitation System	Recommendations
Ineffective rehab program	Establish a rehab and correctional program that is conducive to the child's well-being.
Overcrowding, lack of adequate facilities, poor sanitation and poor food service.	That the government, the NGO's, and the business sectors network and jointly fund and operate a more humane rehab center complete with facilities conducive to therapy/rehabilitation.

Abusive jail guards/staff	Terminate/impose legal sanctions on those found guilty of abusing children while in detention either verbally, physically, sexually.
That even while in detention, children should be treated as human beings, guaranteed of their rights to proper food and clothing, not subject to laborious tasks, and provided with formal education and vocational skills to enable them to be integrated back to society as 'normal' children.	

Problems with Community	Recommendations
Some welfare organizations are afraid to pursue legal action on behalf of the abused offended children	Create community awareness regarding the plight of the abused and neglected children. That child welfare organizations should be informed/educated regarding the rights of the child and that 'justice for children' should be given importance in its program objectives.
Lack of interest of some organizations regarding the rights of the child.	Either provide trainings in para-legal procedures to assess the child's case or close these organizations who refuse to pursue legal action.

Summary Statement
We dream of a time when the law enforcers, the prosecutors, the courts, the correctional and rehabilitation institutions as well as the community have closed ranks and are working together to guarantee a safer and better future for all the children of the world. With your help, we want to see a juvenile justice system that will guarantee and uphold our rights regardless of gender, race, and creed.

In his article *Is the child a political subject?* O'Neill claims that the 'politics of mutism' needs to be exposed:

...children's interests are articulated on their behalf by those on whom they depend for achieving the shift to relative independence. (1997:245)

'Child mutism', as O'Neill calls it, is a political issue. It is an issue that many adults and agencies continue to ignore. There have been few conferences in Australia where agencies have allowed, let alone encouraged, the children who are their clients to speak of their concerns and ways of improving services.

Nine years ago, Maggie Black (1996) writes, on 26 January 1990, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was opened for signing. Black describes the rights as falling under four headings: survival, development, protection, and participation (1996:143-144). Those concerning participation:

...conferred on the child the right to be consulted in matters that affected his or her well-being, for example, in custody cases, and to have a voice in the wider society. (Black, 1996:144)

The children's agenda produced in Manila demonstrates very clearly that, by increasing children's participation, our efforts under the first three headings are likely to be more successful. The problems and recommendations caused all

the adults present to do some soul-searching, about their agencies and their practice.

In years to come, we will no doubt find it extraordinary that children did not play a greater role in our seeking to understand and respond to the problems they face. They should be writing the news as well as featuring in it. Perhaps UNICEF should talk to the children and young people about the politics of family planning. □

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