

**Children's Rights at a Cross-Roads**  
**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 30 – December 1, 2009**

**Opening remarks of Irene Rizzini,**  
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They say that familiarity breeds contempt. It also breeds, of course, love and affection.

Twenty years after the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child we reunite to celebrate and to share our experiences.

Can we fully realize that the passage of the Convention was an earth shattering event deserving of our continued astonishment and wonder?

Who in any other epoch of human history would imagine a world-wide code for the decent and proper treatment of every child on the globe?

Can we further persuade ourselves into a full realization that the passage of the Convention, 20 years ago, confronts us here and now with enormous opportunities and responsibilities?

We have another object of wonder to contemplate this morning: this international gathering of researchers, advocates and policy makers devoted to the improved status of children. For that we have to thank the creative imagination and generosity of the Norwegian government and the dedication and persistence of the CWI secretariat, board and key institutions. We are particularly grateful to our partners in Africa and especially here in Ethiopia for being such wonderful hosts.

As you already know we have a very full program. It is tightly aimed at key issues in the lives of children and key issues in the way that research can improve their lot.

But why did I talk earlier of our responsibilities? Here is why. We could easily exhaust ourselves in the next few days using every precious minute to dialogue with our

colleagues and plan the most interesting collaborative projects or discuss the great difficulties of lining up the very different time tables of researchers and policy makers. We could go home happy and content and persuade the people who sign our monthly checks that we not only did our job but connected our institutions to a remarkable international network.

I believe we would all agree that this is not enough. And it is not enough because while we have made great strides in the years since the Convention was drawn up, too many children are still suffering great harms.

We should celebrate the fact that many children's indicators have shown improvements in the last 20 years. And in addition to significant reductions in, for example, infant and child mortality, we are witnessing a different way of thinking about and listening to children. We have shone a light on the hidden places where children were abused - including places that were supposed to be safe: the family home, the church hall, the group home. Children not only have the legal right to declare they are being abused, but we have also established a consciousness among young people and the adults that surround them that encourages more children to speak out.

In many countries we now give children the same protection as adults against assault by caregivers. In 1993 the European Court, in a case brought by an English step-child against his step-father, banned corporal punishment in the United Kingdom and awarded the child financial damages for the harm done to him. In Europe, many countries banned corporal punishment in schools.

We are all aware, of course, that these achievements bring their own tensions. Many parents and teachers worry about how to discipline their children when youth peer culture seems light years away from the parents' culture. The fear of sexual abuse results in some preschools, in the U.S. for example, forbidding teachers to touch their young students in defiance of everything we know about children's needs for love and affection.

But better those dilemmas than the silence of an abused child, or the beating of a young person in a classroom.

But let us focus for a moment on the old problems which still exist in too many places.

- In occupied Palestine, the Gross National Income per capita is \$1,230 US \$. In Ethiopia it is even lower at \$280 per capita. In Norway it is 87.000 US\$ (The WB, 2008).
- In Morocco the share of national income that goes to the poorest 40% of households is 17% while 47% goes to the richest 20%.
- In Bolivia, those income figures are 7% and 63%.
- In Brazil, 42% of rural families lack a good source of drinking water and in my city, the death rate by homicide for black and brown youth 16-17 is over 300 per 100.000.
- In Bangladesh, 22% of all babies are low-birth weight.
- In Afghanistan, 39% of under-fives suffer from malnutrition.

Can I be accused of picking some of the worst examples and not stating some of the significant improvements that have occurred recently? Yes.

Can I be accused of complacency? I hope not.

My question this morning is how can we make the whole of this wonderful network and gathering of policy makers, advocates, and international organizations greater than the sum of its parts?

How can we make it greater than the sum of its parts specifically in terms of our capacity to impact more significantly children's lives and hence do our part in fulfilling the promise of the CRC?

In the dialogue we are about to start involving committed people from so many countries let us ask ourselves what we have learned, what we have achieved and how as a network can we achieve more?

Let me start contributing to the question about how we can be more effective by reflecting on my own experience with the Childwatch International Network over the last ten years.

First, any mutual assistance that helps each of us do our work better in our own centers and our own contexts is invaluable. Particularly in the global South, we struggle with overwhelming problems and underwhelming resources. For mutual assistance to work, each party to the project needs the humility to recognize how little it knows about the other country, the imagination and resolve to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible, and the respect to recognize the other country's urgencies and other organizations' institutional realities .

Second we need to subordinate our very pressing institutional and professional demands to the demands of children.

Let us also recognize that there are political pressures and policy agendas in our several countries that **not only** do not prioritize children, but even harm children. In my own city, for example, my colleagues and I worry whether the recent announcement that Rio will be the site of the 2016 Olympic Games will result in further official and unofficial, violent repression of our young people.

The CRC won't be implemented unless we stretch our comfort zones to work with people we don't usually work with and do things we don't usually do. A real dialogue also implies discomfort.

Childwatch deliberately invites to its meetings researchers, policy makers and advocates. These groups in our own countries and certainly across national boundaries have different discourses, different timetables and different professional reward structures. But we will accomplish nothing unless we turn our polished rhetoric about cooperation and collaboration into action.

I don't underestimate the tensions as a researcher of working with policy makers whose political bosses have ordered a study to be completed by the end of the week, or advocates who want a politically useful answer to a question they have asked me. And both of those groups must get exasperated by the apparently unhurried pace of the academic research process and academics' sometimes unsophisticated notions of objectivity.

As the researchers among us rightly struggle to maintain our search for the truth let us remember South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu's stern reminder about "neutrality".

*If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.*

Or if we can still quote Marx in this era of under-regulated capitalism,

*Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.*

Childwatch has increased its presence in international decision making forums and its visibility in the last few years, but we still puzzle about how to have a greater impact outside of our individual countries.

Is there a particularly pressing problem that a number of us share and want to work on together?

Can we, most likely in our regions, or perhaps even across regions figure out how our collective voice can hasten better policies and practices for children?

Do we have the time and energy to figure out more strategic and effective ways of working together?

I spoke earlier of the diversity of professional voices, but there are other diversities that can threaten the very fabric of our societies. Let me end by reminding us to celebrate our

diversity here in Addis Ababa and recognize the importance of that fact in a world that demands a deeper understanding of the challenges and beauty of difference.

The distinguished anthropologist Clifford Geertz sees diversity and difference as the essence of being human. And this essential difference does not start in the next village, or the next region or even the next country. In Geertz's words: "Foreignness does not start at the water's edge, but at the skin's".<sup>1</sup>

The biggest difference that exists is between me or you and everyone else, he said.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, writing about his dear friend Edward Said, projects a greater sense of the malleability and uses of difference.

*Identity is the child of birth, but  
at the end, it's self-invention, and not  
an inheritance of the past. I am multiple...  
Within me an ever new exterior. **And**  
**I belong to the question of the victim.***

Let us cherish our multiplicity and use it to give more children the future they deserve.

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<sup>1</sup> Geertz, Clifford, Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p 76.