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International Child Welfare: Deconstructing UNICEF's Country Programmes

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There has been exhaustive scrutiny of the policies of the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations Population Fund. UNICEF, despite a prominent role in agenda setting for children's welfare in developing countries, has not been subject to comparable scrutiny. This paper argues that the Country Programmes promulgated by UNICEF to improve children's welfare reflect ethnocentric conceptualisations of the family. As a case study, Ghana's Country Programme 2001–2005 is considered in detail. Anthropological studies are adduced to highlight underlying ethnocentric assumptions around social organisation. The ramifications of these assumptions are then considered.

Multilateral agencies and policy contestation

A number of seminal works identify the increasingly thorough micro-management of social and economic policy in developing countries by multilateral agencies dominated by the advanced industrial nations. This concern has been most forcefully articulated in relation to lending by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, most particularly in relation to the African Continent (Cornia *et al*., 1987; Escobar, 1995; Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999; Stiglitz, 2002; Oxfam International, 2001; Jubilee South *et al*., 2001; ActionAid, 2002; McGee *et al*., 2002). Although most attention has focused on the Bretton Woods institutions, the United Nations is not exempt from criticism. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), for example, is mired in controversy as an agenda-setting agency in the sphere of reproductive health (Crane and Dusenberry, 2004).

More specific areas of social policy, such as child welfare, not counted by multilateral donors as rudiments of their economic programmes have been largely ignored in the literature. Yet child welfare stands at the intersection of preventative health care, education, reproductive health and the chronic deprivations caused by poverty. It is an elemental site of critical reflection on social policy in developing countries as well a major policy area in which multilateral development agencies are tangibly involved. Within the global social policy literature, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) seems to have dipped below the radar of international attention. Yet UNICEF is a principal agent in the determination and pursuit of welfare policy in relation to children across the developing world. As an agenda-setting multilateral donor, it must not be exempt from critique. Using the example of UNICEF's activity in Ghana, this article scrutinises the policy on child welfare set out in a joint document authored by UNICEF and the Government of Ghana.

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Table 1 Human development indices

Country	Prevalence of under 5 malnutrition	Under 5 mortality rate per 1,000	Net primary level enrolment ratio	Pop. living on less than $1 per day	Access to water source*	
					Urban	Rural
Ghana	25%	100	60%	45%	70%	49%
Kenya	21%	122	70%	23%	67%	49%
Malawi	25%	183	81%	42%	52%	44%
Nigeria	36%	183	–	72%	63%	26%
Zambia	28%	192	66%	64%	64%	27%

Note: *Refers to the percentage of population with access to an adequate clean water supply.
Sources: UNDP (2004) Human Development Report, Tables 3, 7, 9 and 11. World Bank (2001) World Development Report 2000–2001, Tables 2 and 9.

The strategies, underlying philosophy and social constructions of the policy are outlined. Anthropological evidence on social organisation and the construction of childhood in African societies is then adduced to demonstrate the extent to which the assumptions and interventions relied upon by UNICEF and the Ghanaian Government are grossly mis-matched to circumstances on the ground. The final section of this article discusses the implications of this disjunction for child welfare policy formulation in developing countries.

Human development indicators for sub-Saharan Africa

In the sub-Saharan region, children and their families are confronted by circumstances fundamentally different from those pertaining in developed countries. Metrics collated by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme testify to the deprived living conditions endured by countless African households.

Malnutrition is demonstrably high. Figures in Table 1 indicate that it affects one quarter to a third of children on the African continent. Concomitantly, under-five mortality varies between one in ten children in Ghana up to almost one in five in Zambia. Children are also adversely affected by high maternal mortality, typically ranging from 750 deaths per 100,000 live births in Zambia up to 1,800 maternal deaths in Malawi (UNDP, 2004: Table 9). Lack of access to basic public amenities, such as clean water, are contributory factors to the prevalence of morbidity and mortality. So too are the elevated levels of absolute poverty recorded across the sub-Saharan region. As Table 1 reveals, almost one quarter of the population in Kenya and three quarters of those living in Nigeria survive on less than US$1.00 per day. In many sub-Saharan countries low enrolment rates for primary education hold down overall literacy. Not reflected in these figures are the differential literacy rates for males and females. In Malawi just under half of women are literate as compared to three-quarters of men. In Ghana, although overall literacy rates are higher, the same pattern emerges, with two thirds of adult females reported as literate and four fifths of men (UNDP, 2004: Table 24).

Highly indebted African governments presiding over impecunious public sectors are essentially unable to provide social services or social assistance (World Bank, 2001:

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Tables 15 and 21). This in conjunction with the introduction of charges for health and education under the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s makes the payment of hospital charges and school fees problematic for many families and adversely impacts on both physical health and literacy among the populace (Stewart, 1994: 108; UNICEF, 1995). Poor physical and telecommunication infrastructure continue to exacerbate the effects of meagre public sector provision (World Bank, 2001: Tables 18 and 19; UNDP, 2004: Table 12), while mass unemployment on the one hand and livelihoods eked out on subsistence farms or in the unskilled, poorly remunerated informal sector of the towns on the other exclude the possibility of social insurance. Policy directed at children's welfare in the sub-Saharan region is thus situated between grim human development indices and an impoverished public sector. Particulars of the funding arrangements between African governments and multilateral agencies *vis-à-vis* social policy are critical to apprehending the power relationship between these actors.

Child welfare policy in Ghana

To take a typical country case example from Table 1, In 2001, the Government of Ghana and UNICEF published a joint policy *Master Plan of Operations and Programme Plans of Operations 2001–2005* – commonly referred to as the *Country Programme* – to address children's welfare. Under Article XIII set out in this document, UNICEF agreed to fund the total estimated costs of implementation over the five year period, budgeted at US$60,000,000. For its part, the Government of Ghana contracted to 'provide all personnel, premises, supplies, technical assistance and funds, recurring and non-recurring, necessary for the programme, except as provided by UNICEF and/or other United Nations or international agencies' (GoG and UNICEF, 2001: 44). However, given the dependence of the Government of Ghana on donor support in terms of grants and concessionary loans calculated by Foster and Zormelo (2002: 31) at 46 per cent of its total expenditures in 2001, effectively this meant a relatively small public sector monetary contribution. Thus in purely financial terms, UNICEF was in a position to wield considerable influence over national policy to address children's welfare and, to a lesser extent, that of women. Indeed, the dependence of the Government upon UNICEF funding to implement the *Country Programme* is reiterated in Article XIV. This adumbrates the Government's obligations to account to UNICEF for expenditures and to make available to that agency any information requested regarding disbursement of funds and the movement and use of supplies, equipment and cash. The *Country Programme* to all intents and purposes is donor-funded policy implementation. To what degree it is also donor policy making is a moot point.

Three main objectives underlie the *Country Programme* (GoG and UNICEF, 2001: 27), which are to: increase the number of children reaching the age of six, physically and mentally healthy; provide equitable access to all children to quality basic education; support children in need of special protection, especially vulnerable adolescents (i.e. working and street children, street mothers, children subject to exploitation or harmful traditional practices). These three objectives are further articulated through four principal components, which, together with their related projects, comprise the *Country Programme* (Table 2).

These projects and interventions are not neutral instruments. Intrinsic to these strategies for policy implementation are assumptions regarding the nature of social

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relationships and the construction of the family. Deconstructing the *Country Programme* demands that these implicit suppositions are made explicit in order that they can be interrogated and their validity gauged.

Rights-based development

As explicitly acknowledged in the Preamble to the *Country Programme*, its objectives and strategies are underpinned by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and concomitantly a rights-based approach to child welfare. This is consonant with the overarching framework advanced by the United Nations and epitomised in the UNDP (2000) *Human Development Report*, which foregrounds political, social and economic rights. Thus, awareness-raising and advocacy on children's rights are essential vehicles for implementing UNICEF's projects comprising Rights Protection and Promotion and increasing female school enrolment and attendance under Education (see Table 2). However, there is a major difficulty with rights-based approaches in that they conflict with indigenous conceptualisations of rights embedded in a distinctive notion of community.

Scott (1976) in a seminal work on the 'moral economy' studied rural communities in developing countries. He opined that the necessity of distributing risks across households in communities dependent on subsistence farming to ensure that everyone could meet their survival needs was codified in the normative expectation of reciprocal transactions. Rain-fed agriculture and limited technology, combined with often harsh climatic conditions, exposed communities dependent upon a subsistence economy to the jeopardy of crop failure, debilitating illness, water shortages and natural disasters. In such a hazardous environment and where households possessed few tangible assets, social capital became the critical safety net for survival. Reciprocal exchanges of resources between households to mitigate the affects of low rainfall or illness became normative demands upon behaviour. Simultaneously these demands constituted a form of social insurance and a liability, as assistance rendered created the obligation of reciprocation at a future time. Consequently, 'the violation of these standards could be expected to provoke resentment and resistance – not only because needs were unmet, but because rights were violated' (ibid.: 6). Although Scott's study was of societies in Southeast Asia, he has argued that his thesis applies to all 'cultivators who share a common existential dilemma' (ibid.: 25). Confirming this supposition, research conducted by Davies (1996: 36–37) into rural livelihood systems in Mali and Moser and Holland's (1997: 11–12) study of Zambian communities found that social capital in the form of reciprocal transfers in cash and kind operated within both urban and rural–urban networks.

There is evident incongruity between the concept of rights advanced by UN agencies and those entrenched in the 'moral economy' of many indigenous communities. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* gives expression to a Western conception of unilateral and inalienable human rights. For instance, articles 12 and 13 guarantee a child's right to express his or her viewpoint, while articles 19 and 32 protect children against maltreatment and exploitation. Everywhere in the Convention are the obligations of state and parents articulated, but nowhere are children characterised as having duties correlative to their rights. The absence of such duties is tremendously problematic for societies whose notion of rights is founded on interdependence and reciprocity. Exacerbating this difficulty is the social construction of childhood implied by the

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Table 2 Components of the *Country Programme*

Programmes	Projects	Main objectives	Main strategies
Rights promotion & protection	Rights promotion	promote awareness of women's and children's rights	advocacy targeting high risk groups
	Child protection	improve welfare of children in need of special protection e.g. children with a disability, street children	education and vocational services to target groups peer-to-peer education adolescent empowerment
Health	Child health promotion & disease control	reduce impact of common childhood diseases	target deprived districts improve service delivery and utilisation
	Maternal & infant health	improve coverage of antenatal, obstetric, infant care and reproductive health services	community education and mobilisation particularly for women and children
	Environmental health	reduce incidence of water and excreta related diseases	improve information dissemination
Nutrition	Young child & maternal nutrition	improve nutrition of under 5s, adolescent girls and women of reproductive age	target vulnerable communities and groups holistic approach to nutrition education
	Control of micronutrient deficiency	elimination of major micronutrient deficiency disorders in children and pregnant women	micro-credit for women community education and mobilisation advocacy towards opinion leaders
	Household food security	improve household food security	
Education	National capacity enhancement	strengthen national capacity at Ministry of Education	advocacy service delivery through integrated community-based approaches
	Child–school–community process	improve female school enrolment and completion	community mobilisation and empowerment
	Early psycho-social & intellectual stimulation	improvement in psycho-social development of children aged 0–8 years	

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Convention in which children have no duties, a construction subsequently incorporated into the *Country Programme*.

The social construction of childhood

The 'moral economy' identified by Scott (1976) is not exclusive to the relations between households in a community; it also permeates relations within kinship groups. Surviving on subsistence farming or confronted by the deprivation pervasive in the conurbations of the sub-Saharan region, families are simultaneously productive and reproductive entities. Typically in Ghana, as in other African societies, households are multigenerational, comprising the extended family which functions as a complementary portfolio of domestic and commercial activities in order to sustain household livelihood (Nukunya, 1992; Oppong, 1994; Turner, 1996). Domestic and economic complementarity is based around the roles, often ascribed, of different generations within the household. This is particularly accentuated around female trading activities with older female family members engaging in doorstep trading, thus providing supervision of small children while their daughters and granddaughters are freed to conduct business outside of the home. Similarly, young children may provide ancillary services to older household members, such as carrying produce in order to facilitate the trading activities of their mothers and grandmothers (Koomson *et al*., 1996). In the absence of public utilities, welfare services or social security households are dependent upon children to perform time-consuming menial tasks, ranging from the collection of firewood and water, often from distances measured in kilometres, to the laborious preparation of food from raw ingredients. Additionally, offspring are liable to be required to undertake productive activity to enable the household to meet its survival needs. This form of social organisation is underpinned by a value system which emphasises the obligations owed by children to their parents in terms of contributing to the household and providing care during sickness or old age. Failure to fulfil these responsibilities will attract censure and probably penalty both from kin and the wider community (Gyekye, 1998). Indeed, it is arguable that the ontological boundary between one individual and another is situated differently in most African communities as compared with Western societies. An interdependent nexus of family members within a household or households within a community meshes together individual goals and pursuits, making them either indistinguishable or unviable if collective survival needs are to be met (Cobbah, 1987; Shivji, 1989).

The vital mutual reliance integral to African social organisation accounts for the fundamentally different construction of childhood on the continent from that of the West. As Bequele and Boyden (1995) observed, children in developing countries are simply absorbed into the workforce as soon as they pass the age of physiological dependency. A grossly inadequate education system, widespread poverty and a demand for casual, unskilled, low-paid workers in the informal sector makes the transition from child to worker seamless and inevitable. Save the Children (1994), in its study of street children in low-income countries, highlighted the positive contribution working children make towards their family; in particular, their critical involvement in meeting household survival needs, combined with a precocious independence and pride in adopting an essentially adult role. Indeed, as Thane (1981) has averred, the circumscription of childhood as a distinctive social space is a relatively recent phenomenon, reflecting the new demands for skilled labour and entrepreneurship inherent to the agricultural and industrial revolutions

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of Europe and North America. Hitherto, those aged 5–17 years had not been granted a prolonged dependency as they gained education and skills accompanied by a period freed from the social and economic responsibilities of adulthood. It is thus unremarkable that Ghanaian authorities should report the customary expectation of parents that their children begin domestic and commercial work as early as possible (Sarbah, 1968; Danquah, 1994).

The social construction of the family in the *Country Programme*

Despite the inextricably bound and tenuous livelihoods of households, the *Country Programme* makes no concession in terms of projects or strategies to the realities of social organisation in Ghana. Mothers, adolescents and fathers are treated as broken off from one another, individuated into separate spheres of activity, with the aged mentioned not at all. Just one oblique reference is made throughout the 190-page document to the extended family. Indeed, only mothers and their young children appear to be treated as a social unit. Undeniably in Ghana, as in other African countries, many women are single mothers, abandoned by their male partners and ostracised by their families. Many children do roam the streets, independent and detached from family with 15,000 estimated in Accra, Ghana's capital (CAS and UNICEF, 1999). However, the vast majority of mothers and children live within family and wider kinship groupings. It is these cohesive social contexts which the *Country Programme* fails to feature or incorporate into the design of interventions.

Men have entirely vanished from the *Country Programme*, there is only one reference to them; 'men often have responsibilities to the extended family' (GoG and UNICEF, 2001: 161). No further elaboration is advanced as to the nature of these responsibilities or how they might impact the nuclear family. Women are thus portrayed as if they were all single mothers, with no deliberation upon their interaction with male partners or other family members. The multigenerational household is not referred to at any point in the *Country Programme*, nor are the crucial contributions of offspring to the household economy. Children are construed as either dependants of their mothers or wholly individuated adolescents, who pursue their own activities divorced from family dynamics and obligations. Since men do not feature in the *Country Programme*, ipso facto neither do gender relations. No account is rendered of the power differential between men and women, nor as between elders and other kinship members in households which are generally characterised by both patriarchy and gerontocracy (Assimeng, 1981; Nukunya, 1992; Kuenyehia and Bortei-Doku Aryeetey, 1998; Abotchie, 1997). In effect, family members are individualised within a policy context and consequently the conflict of child rights with indigenous notions of rights and the construal of childhood is not examined.

A critique of strategies in the *Country Programme*

Aside from advocacy on children's rights as already discussed, the main strategies adopted in the *Country Programme* are set out in Table 2. Under Rights Promotion & Protection and Education, the main interventions are the provision of education and vocational skills to youth, particularly those who are out-of-school, living on the streets or working. However, no consideration is given to the ways in which engagement in education or

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training may deprive the household of vital income. No compensation for the opportunity cost to the household of prolonged instruction is factored into intervention strategies in this area. The emphasis on peer-to-peer education on HIV/AIDS prevention and (undefined) adolescent empowerment neglects the situated context of young people within a kin group. Accordingly, the strategy ignores the family pressures which can be brought to bear upon adolescents, predominantly girls, to engage in early sexual activity in order to supplement the incomes of poverty-stricken households (Jiggins, 1986; Nabila and Fayorsey, 1996). It also disregards the consequences of adolescent empowerment, if this in practice means youth simply detaching from the family unit and pursing goals and activities divorced from it. Within the Health component women described as 'critical change agents in environmental sanitation and hygiene behaviour' are to be the main target of intervention (GoG and UNICEF, 2001: 135). Yet this proposal ignores the gendered power relations within the household, which may impede women's ability to change the actions of family members. No strategies are advanced to address this aspect of programme implementation. While some attention is paid under Rights Promotion & Protection to raising awareness of women's rights, this is not integrated into proposed strategies, nor couched in terms indicative of actual engagement with gender relations as opposed to mere exhortation. The Nutrition component of the *Country Programme* similarly fails to consider (gendered) relations within a household context, with mothers construed as the sole carers of children. There is once again dependence upon advocacy of women's and children's rights to increase their access to nutrition. Micro-credit is advanced to enhance the earnings of mothers so that they can better meet the needs of their children, but this intervention is not integrated into the nexus of relationships, which form the dynamic livelihood activity of a household. Thus, the economic aspects of women's roles within the family are portrayed as independent activities detached from it.

Implications for international policy formulation

The *Country Programme* for Ghana closely resembles that of other African countries, all of which commence with a list of national human development indicators. But these metrics are deceptive; they circumvent complex social contexts. They also disguise the comprehensive differences between the structure of Western societies and those of sub-Saharan countries. The imposition of interventions upon an unconsidered and un-scrutinised social setting inevitably results in confusion and resistance from those subject to them. Indeed, UNICEF and the Government of Ghana admit in their *Country Programme* to, 'the yawning gap between awareness and practice' *vis-à-vis* nutrition-related behaviours under the auspices of the Health component (GoG and UNICEF, 2001: 156). Plainly, advocacy and sensitisation, two of the foremost strategies adopted in the *Country Programme*, are deficient. Arguably, regardless of how ingenious the accompanying visual aids, these strategies will continue to fail until such times as UNICEF incorporates the anthropological and sociological evidence into the formulation of its *Country Programmes*. This must include: attention to the moral economy, the crucial interdependence of the multigenerational household, the more mature role of children in African societies, the centrality of kinship structure and the steep power differential between the sexes.

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More generally, documentation produced by the Bretton Woods Institutions, UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF continues to pay more attention to metrics than country-specific anthropological and sociological studies. The implication is that policies ostensibly designed by multilateral agencies incorporate Western conceptualisations of social organisation. The tendency of authorities on international social policy to concentrate their focus on policy formulation at a supranational level rather than on country-specific instances to some degree explains the paucity of anthropological material marshalled to challenge agenda setting by multilateral donors. There has also been an over concentration in the literature on the social effects of IMF-dictated macro-economic policy in developing countries at the expense of interrogating the role of other multilateral agencies around social policy formulation and implementation. It is patent from a deconstruction of UNICEF's *Country Programmes* that such an oversight must be redressed through country-specific studies and unreserved engagement with the anthropological record.

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