

Dismantling and Reconstructing International Children's Rights

Ghazal Keshavarzian

MAY 2022



Cover Illustration
Idyllic Day by Galuh Indri Wiyarti

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A Report Summarizing the Key
Learnings and Recommendations from
the Reconstructing Children's Rights
Institute – an Online Institute about
Dismantling Colonialism, Racism, and
Patriarchy in International Development
and Humanitarian Aid Efforts

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The contents of the report are the responsibility of the CPC Learning Network and should not be taken to represent the views of any other organization.

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Introduction

When practiced inappropriately and without making explicit the underlying dynamics of power and funding, international development, humanitarian aid, and philanthropy can cause harm and undermine the dignity and autonomy of those it intends to support, who become othered “beneficiaries.” The axes of power differentiation includes class, gender, age, race, and ethnicity, among others. The humanitarian community’s search for quick, cost-effective solutions can heighten the likelihood of imposing concepts and practices that replicate oppressive, patriarchal, and racist norms. The recognition of this imbalance of power and potential harm has deep-rooted historical underpinnings, and constructive critique has been taking place for decades in academia, local communities, and activist communities.¹ These inequalities and injustices with their roots in colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, are especially problematic in fields such as children and youth’s rights, child development, and child protection, in which the roles of children, young people, and caregivers in their families and communities will vary from context to context.

Accordingly, in 2021, the Care and Protection of Children (CPC) Learning Network, housed in the [Program on Forced Migration and Health](#) in the Department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, and the [Global Health Justice and Governance Program](#), hosted the [Reconstructing Children’s Rights Institute](#) — an online institute about dismantling racism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy in humanitarian and development efforts to protect children and support families.

The Institute has two overarching goals:

Demonstrate and engage:

Raise awareness and recognition of how colonialism, racism, and patriarchy are not just theoretical concepts, but real drivers of inequality, ineffectiveness, and harm in the international child rights and protection sector.

Sow the seeds and demonstrate action for effective change:

Critique the problems inherent in the international child rights and protection sector, but also highlight practical ways to dismantle and reconstruct the existing system.

¹ Refer to [Master Reference List](#) for list of resources and articles dating back to the 1970s.

A: Reconstructing Children's Rights Institute Resources

Six Conversations:

1. Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in International Relations, Development and the Humanitarian Aid Industries: [Briefing Paper #1](#), [Trailer](#), [Full Conversation](#).
2. Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in Child Welfare and Children's Rights Programming: [Briefing Paper #2](#), [Trailer](#), [Full Conversation](#).
3. Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in Funding: [Briefing Paper #3](#), [Trailer](#), [Full Conversation](#).
4. Our Stories, Our Faces, Our Voices: Who Tells Our Story?: [Briefing Paper #4](#), [Trailer](#), [Full Conversation](#).
5. Confronting Paternalism, Neo-Colonialism, and Racism in the Design and Implementation of Child and Family Programs in Humanitarian and Development Settings: [Briefing Paper #5](#), [Trailer](#), [Full Conversation](#).
6. How Can Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion be Understood and Applied in Humanitarian and Development Organizations? - [Briefing Paper #5](#) and [Full Conversation](#).

Additional resources:

[Introductory Video](#)

[Master Reference List](#)

[Blog](#) written for the Rights Studio.

[Galuh Indri Wiyarti Illustrations](#):

Visual representation of the Institute's themes: Possession, Exploitation, Discrimination, Domination, Resistance, and Rebellion.

All resources available on the [CPC website](#).

To that end, the Institute created a multi-part series of conversations and resources to guide chief executives and leaders, policymakers, donors, practitioners, academics, researchers, students, visual artists, storytellers, and activists in their learning journey. In this series of six conversations, broadcast between May and December 2021, we invited a diverse group of experts from academia, philanthropy, visual arts, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and activist communities to share their insights about racism, colonialism, patriarchy, and power imbalances as they affect children, young people, and families around the world. Refer to Text Box A for complete list of resources.

Through the Institute, we have been trying to understand from our guest speakers, who have dedicated their careers to social justice, how to deconstruct power and accountability inequities and transform the humanitarian and development industries to be in better service to children, young people, families, and communities. We all agree that international humanitarian aid can be necessary, but there needs to be a reset button to interrogate our assumptions, begin to take responsibility for our roles, and to redress power to ensure a more accountable system. As a community, we have not yet deconstructed the roots of power and its manifestations and are not willing to challenge and question the inherent power imbalances and "whiteness" in international aid. As noted by one of the speakers, as we move forward as a community, we need to

**sit in the discomfort of our failure and
of the harms that we have produced
when we thought we were doing good.**

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Associate Professor, Hubert H. Humphrey, School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, Conversation #1

We hope that you and your respective organizations can find inspiration and drive from the Institute's insightful voices and begin to work in accountable and equitable partnership with this community of rebellion; and more importantly, to engage local organizations, communities, activists, children, young people, and families to not just shift power but relinquish power.

The children's rights community must come together to begin this reckoning and critically examine and redress these power imbalances. As a community, we must be careful to situate these current "decolonizing aid" conversations within the context of more recent conversations of inherent power imbalances, such as "localization," "shifting power," and the "#MeToo movement." All these conversations, as well as earlier critiques, are part of a larger continuum of deep rooted structural and systematic power inequities that need to be addressed urgently, not with check box exercises, buzzwords, or cosmetic changes but with radical structural, strategic, and systemic changes; effective accountability measures; and movement building.

This report summarizes the key reflections that emerged from the Institute's series of six conversations, highlights the inherent problems and provides recommendations for a way forward, as articulated by the sixteen experts. We hope that this report, in addition to the other Institute resources, can serve as a guide to facilitate self-reflection and reform.

All speakers highlighted that radical change takes effort and is not simple work that can be easily translated into matrixes over a fixed timeline. Systematic changes require self-reflection and an open-mind and patience, honesty, flexibility, and humility. We hope that you and your respective organizations can find inspiration and drive from the Institute's insightful voices and begin to work in accountable and equitable partnership with this community of rebellion; and more importantly, to engage local organizations, communities, activists, children, young people, and families to not just shift power but relinquish power.

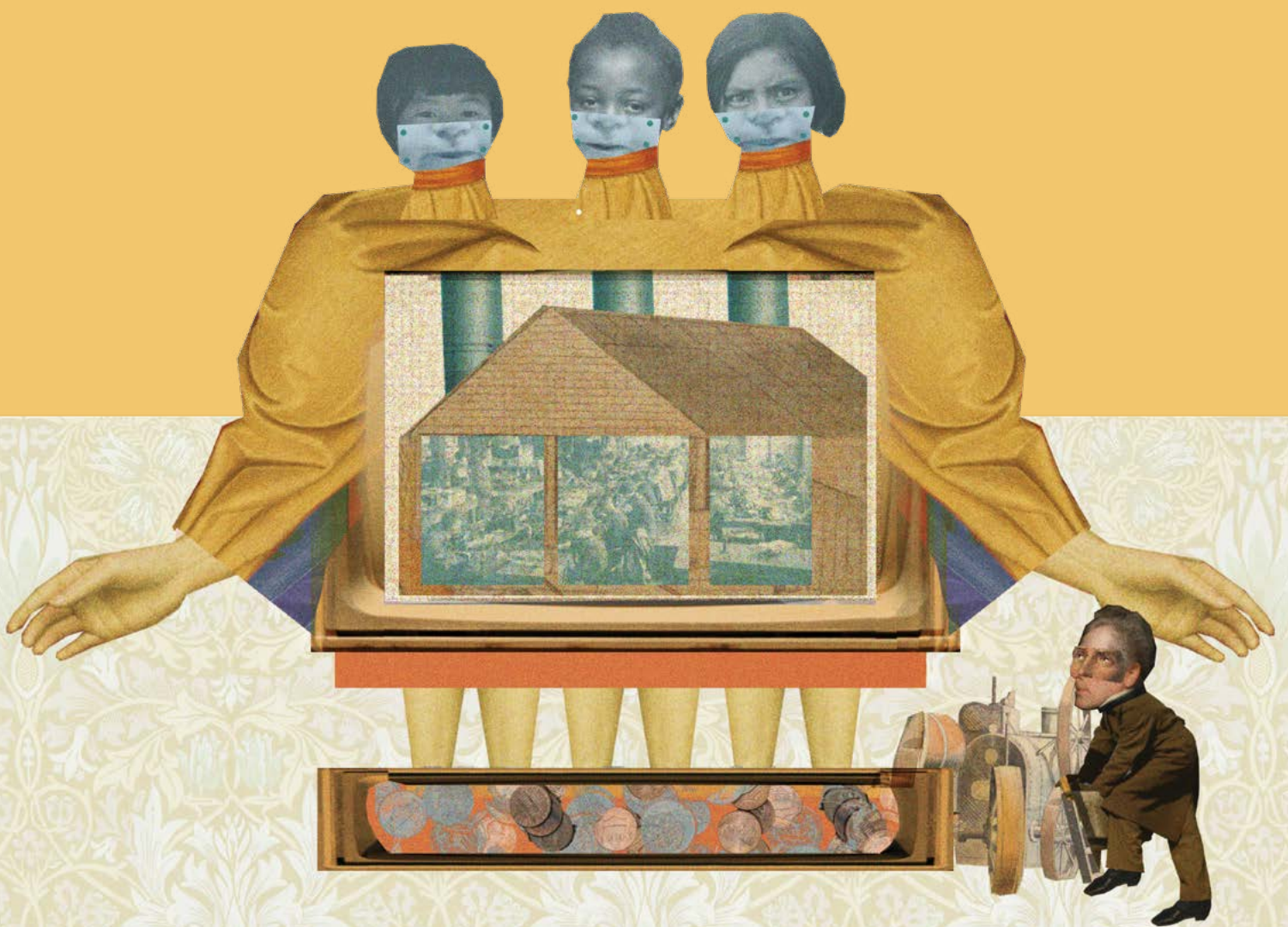
Problems and Solutions

| Dismantling Children's Rights: Current and Historic Structural Inequalities and Forms of Oppression | Reconstructing Children's' Rights: Future Orientation Towards Justice and Rights |
|--|---|
| Racism; classism; sexism/patriarchy; paternalism; neo-colonialism (colonial structures); imperialism; whiteness/whitewashing; white feminism | Justice and compassion; recognition; equality and egalitarianism; anti-racism; intersectional feminism |
| Power (control, abuse, imbalance, and inequities) | Mutual. accountability and relinquishing power |
| Industry (with layers of power, oppression, "professionalism" and resources, big business, hierarchy of power, people) | Critique of status quo and power |
| De-politicized, disingenuous neutrality | Political; politicizing children's rights; building a constituency |
| Distrust | Trust |
| Privilege, Ego | Humility, questioning, and listening |
| Goodness and good intentions versus bad | Who defines goodness? Knowledge? Values? |
| Comfort | Discomfort |
| Broken | Healing and holistic |
| Status quo | Disruptive and dismantle (system) |
| Isolated, working in competition, territorial | Intersectional and transnational movements, Community of rebellion, partnerships |
| Rigid, technical | Imagination (including political imagination) |
| Individualistic (self-contained individualism) | Collective, community |
| Difficult | Hope |
| Dismay | Repair |
| Protectionism or victimhood of children/youth ("saving Black and Brown bodies") | Child/Youth power and agency |
| Language, knowledge (where is it coming from? who controls it?) | Emic/endogeneity (coming from within) |
| Outsider – imposition | Solutions lie elsewhere |
| Beneficiary | Teacher and Partner; respect |
| Inequality | Equity |
| Fear | Courage |
| Ignorance and arrogance | Interrogate our assumptions |
| Singular story | Multiple voices; visual storytelling and arts |
| (Childhood) Innocence | Agency and failure |
| Fixed timelines and checkboxes | Monumental task |
| Managing risk | Taking risks |

2

The Problems

**The Inherent Problems in the International
Development and Humanitarian Aid Industry**
(including Children's Rights and Child Protection Sector)



//

The way to begin to really dismantle some of this is to just really sit with how unbelievably bad we as a collective have been at thinking about these questions, at addressing these problems and challenges, and most fundamentally at not taking responsibility for our part... and perhaps the solutions lie elsewhere and not with us. And I think that's really difficult to wrap your head around because that means some of us are going to be out of work right, it means some of us aren't going to raise money... have books to write about, whatever it may. But I think until we have that reckoning that the dismantling doesn't really begin.

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Conversation #1

//

The only way to get to the solutions — or the how — is to truly grapple with and understand these problems, particularly as they relate to the international children's rights field.

While the Institute's sixteen speakers hail from different disciplines, they all share similar concerns regarding the international development and humanitarian aid industry's deep-rooted structural problems. All speakers spoke about how the industry has overlooked, ignored, or disregarded aid's structures and systems, and how the flow of resources and power are rooted in racism, colonialism, imperialism, slavery, patriarchy, adultism, whiteness ("unseen and unarticulated"), white supremacy, "whitewashing," and other systems of oppression. Turning a blind eye to structural oppression has created power imbalances which are the real drivers of inequality, ineffectiveness, and harm. While these problems are relevant to the broader humanitarian aid industry, the speakers discussed specific applications to the international children's rights and protection sector. Overall, there is a lack of understanding and discussion of the root causes of and manifestations and layers of power particularly in the international children's rights sector.² The children's rights space can be even more problematic than the wider humanitarian aid sector since power imbalances are further layered by intrinsic issues related to child welfare and child protection policies, which are laden with patriarchal ideology about the ways that children should be raised and the ways that families and society should relate to one another.

Since the term "decolonizing aid" started trending in the summer of 2020, the response has been how do we tick the box to fix the problems, minimize the risk, and make us feel good. But, as all speakers stressed, to have this reckoning and to do this work effectively and to redress power, we need to engage in a much deeper conversation that is honest, uncomfortable, and radical about the inherent problems in the humanitarian aid industry. The only way to get to the solutions — or the how — is to truly grapple with and understand these problems, particularly as they relate to the international children's rights field.



It's an inherently problematic sector that we have not as a structure, as a system, even attempted or tried to deconstruct both the root cause and the manifestation of our power, how that power is manifested in different countries, and how we show up in the world.

Chernor Bah, Co-Founder and CEO, Purposeful, Conversation #6



² Throughout the report, we will use different terms to define the sector – international children's rights, child protection, child development etc.

The problems identified by the Institute speakers:

I

**Outsiders'
Shield of Good
Intentions**

II

**Civilizing
Project of Child
Protection**

III

**The Big Business
and Industry**

IV

**Problematic
Funding
Ecosystem**

V

**Unconscious
and Unintended
Racism**

VI

**The Propaganda
of Language**

VII

**Dangers of
Box-Ticking
Exercises**

VIII

**Singular Story
of Visual Arts**

IX

**Divergent
Conceptions
of Self**

X

**Misconceptions
of Womanhood
and Motherhood**

XI

**De-Politicizing
Children's Rights**



Click on the problem to
go directly to the page

I **Outsiders' Shield of Good Intentions:** Colonial Structures, Liberalism, Imperialism, White Feminism, and Mutual Accountability

To understand the colonial, racist, and patriarchal mindsets, and systems of oppression within humanitarian aid, it is important to unpack this outsider's shield of good intention and norms of responsibility and sovereignty.

Throughout the six conversations, one of the underlying points of discussion was how difficult it is to challenge power imbalances and uphold accountability measures within the humanitarian aid industry, especially those who work on children's issues. This challenge occurs because workers in the sector inherently think they are doing "good" – the good intentions of the West. To understand the colonial, racist, and patriarchal mindsets, and systems of oppression within humanitarian aid, it is important to unpack this outsider's shield of good intention and norms of responsibility and sovereignty.

Throughout the late 20th century and by the mid-2000s, the norms of responsibility (which the notion of the "responsibility to protect," especially for women and children, emerged from) allowed some States the "moral" obligation to interfere in other States' affairs. This normative underpinning made the concept of sovereignty supple, contingent, and relative rather than absolute, which was a radical idea. Accordingly, some States are deemed sovereign (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Western European countries, or other "Democratic" states) while others are not. And, accordingly, the Western outsiders (e.g., international development and humanitarian aid actors) play a role in these interventions, which is anchored in the ideas of liberalism and can be traced back to the imperial and colonial project.³

3 Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Associate Professor, Hubert H. Humphrey, School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, Conversation #1: Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in International Relations, Development, and the Humanitarian Aid Industries.

The role of the Western outsider evolved to not only direct service provision (e.g., health and water/sanitation services) but also exporting of “democratic” values, morality, and norms. For example, the colonial and imperial underpinnings can be seen in white feminism, and the exporting of democracy onto women and children. White feminism permeates the international development and humanitarian industry, particularly in relation to children’s rights and child protection:⁴

“In my study of the female fighter and I think my time in the aid world, in the policy world, it’s sort of this overlap of the colonial underpinnings of a version of white feminism that I come up against most starkly. And so, the Venn diagram of the two which one could argue completely overlap at times but it’s really there that structurally my work faces barriers right. This can manifest in a lot of ways but for me primarily in this kind of hypocrisy of power...”

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Professor, City College of New York, Conversation #1

This framing of white people with good intentions as neutral has resulted in the “West” becoming the stand-in for what is good, appropriate, and normal, and these assumptions have become the norm in humanitarian intervention and aid.

Within this framing of responsibility and humanitarianism, the Western outsiders (or “white people”) and their interventions are deemed good, with good intentions, and “neutral.” This framing of white people with good intentions as neutral has resulted in the “West” becoming the stand-in for what is good, appropriate, and normal, and these assumptions have become the norm in humanitarian intervention and aid.⁵ This framing can be problematic since an outsider’s conception of what is good for individuals, children, women, families, and communities may not align with their own conceptions of goodness, e.g., when they draft their own child welfare or family laws, or what kind of violence they may deem as legitimate. Furthermore, this reliance upon good intentions releases the international actors from any forms of accountability within the development and humanitarian aid industry; good intentions provide a shield in managing risks and looking good. But as one speaker noted, “what is important is not ‘good intention’ but what is the effect you are having?”⁶

“It’s a hard thing to square that whiteness might be not malicious but it is insidious. It’s not intended to hurt you, but it absolutely will. It’s the unseen, the unarticulated. The sort of maneuvers of whiteness that we’ve all felt in our work.”

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1

4 Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Professor, City College of New York, Conversation #1: Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in International Relations, Development, and the Humanitarian Aid Industries.

5 Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, RMC - Romain Murphy Consulting, Conversation #6: How Can Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion be Understood and Applied in Humanitarian and Development Organizations?

6 Cherner Bah, Co-Founder and CEO, Purposeful, Conversation #6: How Can Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion be Understood and Applied in Humanitarian and Development Organizations?



Challenging of inherent power imbalances is particularly difficult if people think they are doing good... doing good doesn't feel like imperialism but that doesn't mean that it isn't anchored in many of the same logics and same tools. The truth is that the most powerful states in the world rarely take actions or make investments based on what the people in those communities actually want and believe. They are there for their own sets of reasons and motivations.

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Conversation #1



The real damage that comes in here that we just really need to be honest about and the industry needs to be honest about is the abuse of power especially when it comes to good intentions of aid, create space and place in the industry's mind that so much can be forgiven, that so much can be understood because it's to help people, it's for helping people, and so that it's almost used as a shield and as excuse for then how images are transmitted, how stories are taken and utilized.

Aisha Bain, Chief Architect and Co-Founder, Resistance Communications,
Conversation #4



II Civilizing and Protectionism of Childhood and Child Protection

European colonists justified their military conquests and ongoing oppression by arguing that they had a “civilizing mission” vis-à-vis “uncivilized” people. In modern day military, political, or humanitarian interventions, these constructions of vulnerability and protectionism continue to be embedded within these outdated colonial frameworks:

/// The construction of vulnerability is a construction with which Western interveners are very comfortable and that the idea that there are those who need to be protected, who need to be saved often from their own cultures, their own families... that idea has existed vis-à-vis adults who are Brown and Black for centuries and I can only imagine how much more difficult it would be to dismantle it for children who in fact have obvious vulnerabilities and for which I would imagine that framing can be left uninterrogated without a lot of trouble and without a lot of resistance.

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Conversation #1

The unfounded justification or rationale of “helping” or “protecting” represents a thorough line from colonialism to modern-day humanitarian child protection that our speakers made explicit: there is justification of harmful action through a paternalistic, racist lens of presuming to “civilize” people who otherwise would be incapable of raising their children. The protectionism construct within the international children’s rights field is embedded in colonial, racist, and patriarchal frameworks—a modern-day civilizing mission.

/// Protectionism of children which is embedded in system of patriarchy and colonialism that sees the families of communities that these programs are set up in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Southeast Asia, in the Middle East and North Africa, we see oftentimes communities as not safe places for children and a lot of the frameworks are that communities and parents are harmful to children. We have a lot of discourses that kind of frame them that way which then adds an additional layer for these international mechanisms, multilaterals, bilateral, and governments, to step into that role. And what it does is it further infantilizes children in some ways because their agency is layered under their parents and if the parents are not seen as credible, then the children are seen as less powerful and that they need to be protected.

Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Executive Director, Children’s Rights Innovation Fund, Conversation #3

Protectionism is further layered by how patriarchy and colonialism have informed the international children’s rights, child protection, and child development sector’s assumptions and conceptions about childhood. The international community continues to equate innocence with childhood, or an ideal childhood.

/// Colonial way of thinking informs the way we conceptualize childhood and what’s seen as an ideal or as an appropriate childhood and I think some of these conceptualizations bear very little resemblance to the lives of children in many parts of the world.

Tina Hyder, Executive Director, Amna (formerly Refugee Trauma Initiative), Conversation #5



Civilizing project of development.

Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Conversation #3



The nations where the international organizations are delivering child protection, humanitarian aid have almost inevitably been the subject of colonization and colonialism in the past but also, they are aware that very often the humanitarian regime bring ongoing colonialism in their work and I'm talking about the communities to whom it's being delivered. So, a first steps is for humanitarian workers to acknowledge the long-term ongoing impacts of colonialism and colonization and that includes power, oppression, and economic deprivation.

Dr. Catherine Love, Māori activist and Advisor for CPC Learning Network
Conversation #2



Child protection as a field, as a professionalized field, has not been willing to step into to actually look at what is really the experience of people, how has the experience of colonialism, of ethnic cleansing, of destruction, erasure in so many different ways, how does that impact a society? How does it shape what it means to them, what protection itself means to them, what needs to be protected, what is human dignity?

Dr. Jason Hart, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath, Conversation #2

III The Big Business and Industry of International Development and Humanitarian Aid

Throughout all the conversations, one of the overarching themes that emerged is that international development and humanitarian aid, including the international child rights/protection sector, have become an “industry” with all the attendant structures, revenue streams, vested interests, and flaws of one. There is an urgent need to examine these problematic, and at times unaccountable, structures and vested interests.

- The international children’s rights/protection ecosystem is defined by profound power imbalances with a small group of heavily resourced United Nations (UN) agencies, international NGOs, consultancy firms, and academic institutions holding the levers of power and managing the resources and, in turn, determining the priorities and interests of the sector. This concentration of power has translated into an “oligarchy of organizations”⁷ that actively work together as an insular circle, making it extremely difficult for them to be held accountable.



you’re telling a story with photography but just so people would give money and that’s it. I think that’s really the main goal nowadays and I think that needs to be changed.

Galuh Indri Wiyarti, Reconstructing Children’s Rights Institute Illustrator,
Conversation #4



- The industry is not politically or economically neutral as development budgets are linked to foreign policy agendas which are at the center of conflicts, unrest, and insecurity. Non-profit organizations are being funded by philanthropies, governments, and corporations whose revenues have been derived from inhumane and unjust practices, resource extraction, loans, and corporate globalization. The “oligarchy of organizations” is related based on their primary business activities and sources of revenue; they contribute to and profit from the industry. There is little space given to interrogate donors and implementing organizations about their funding sources.⁹

This sector has become a “big business”⁸ and follows the pattern of post-colonial and geo-political trends, the market economy, and corporate pyramid schemes. Funding sources and flows are rooted and further layered in colonial, racist, and patriarchal histories, and systems of oppression.

7 Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, Conversation #6

8 Dr. Jason Hart, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath, Conversation #2: Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in Child Welfare and Children’s Rights Programming.

9 Dr. Jason Hart (Conversation #2); Tina Hyder (Conversation #5); and Chornor Bah (Conversation #6) discussed these issues.

- The international child protection industry is increasing defined by the exporting of certain ways of operating, models, language and terms, systems design, measurement, programming, and policies. By doing this, the industries structures do not allow room for understanding and only allows people to respond technically. And, with respect to child welfare, the way of operating, which is Anglo-Saxon systems, intervenes when families are perceived to have broken down, that system, which has many problems, is being exported through the humanitarian industry.¹⁰
- Humanitarian aid and international development, and in turn the international child protection sector, has evolved into an industry as illustrated by its use of the same communication strategies and tactics as advertising or marketing firms to raise funds and sell a product. The aid industry raises the same questions around extraction, demand, profit, exploitation, and ownership of images, as the marketing industry: "They are the same people, the same system, the same culture. Who has the voice, the power to tell the story and who decides who is going to be the main character in the story? The history has been taught from the oppressor's eyes."¹¹
- One side effect of the industrialization is the privileging of professionalism as defined by the international community rather than tapping into existing networks, people, and skills already present in the local communities: "professionalized credential inflation has been applied to [international] child protection work in that people need degrees in social work or psychology or other areas and at the same time this has under-valued the informal systems which could stead have been strengthened..."¹²
- Another side effect of the industrialization of the child protection sector is the prioritization and primary motivation of careerism. The industry "is about people maintaining their positions, their status, their jobs and by maintaining and almost perpetuating a problem rather than actually looking at ways to do yourself and do oneself out of a job ..." ¹³

10 Dr. Catherine Love, Māori activist and Advisor for CPC Learning Network, Conversation #2: Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in Child Welfare and Children's Rights Programming.

11 Miriam Sugranyes, Illustrator and Art Director, The Rights Studio, Conversation #4: Our Stories, Our Faces, Our Voices: Who Tells Our Story?

12 Dr. Catherine Love, Conversation #2.

13 Tina Hyder, Executive Director, Amna (formerly Refugee Trauma Initiative), Conversation #5, Confronting Paternalism, Neo-Colonialism, and Racism in the Design and Implementation of Child and Family Programs in Humanitarian and Development Settings.



[There is need for] an examination of the vested interests of the industry... there's an industry that surrounds development and humanitarian structures and I think we need to examine our values, our norms, our assumptions within those industries and how we're self-perpetuating...-

Tina Hyder, Conversation #5




[Child protection] has become a major industry in the Global North... *[International child protection]* It's also a global export industry in the context of international child protection in humanitarian settings.

Dr. Catherine Love, Conversation #2




IV The Inherent Problems and Challenges in the International Children's Rights and Protection Funding Ecosystem

All speakers discussed the structural problems of the funding ecosystem and how neocolonialism, racism, patriarchy, adultism, whiteness, elitism, and other systems of oppression continue to be evident in funding structures, institutions, patterns, policies, and resource flows. Within the current aid industry, power is intricately linked to money and access to resources. Despite recent discussions surrounding shifting power and decolonizing aid, bilateral and philanthropic funding systems have not changed and have not been disrupted. As several speakers noted, it is not only that the funding systems are ineffective — they can also be profoundly and deeply harmful.

-  Colonialism, racism, and patriarchy in the international children's rights funding ecosystem has created harmful narratives and assumptions regarding the ability and capacity of children, young people, and their communities. Ultimately, these harmful assumptions about communities create and foster structures rooted in distrust that keep resources and power from children, young people, families, and local organizations.
-  There are profound power imbalances within the funding ecosystem that lie with a small club of UN agencies and international NGOs who hold the levers of power, manage, and access the available financial resources. Financial resources are primarily consolidated within the international development agencies, philanthropic foundations, and corporate donors residing in North America, Europe, Australia, and other high-income countries — the resources flow from them down to the international NGOs and UN. While there are local and regional civil society organizations, they continue to receive a very limited portion of funds, are not part of the funding and programming decision-making processes and play a secondary role in the global ecosystem.

 *"Most of the donors are not working with community organizations and local NGOs because they [donors] think they [local NGOs] have limited capacities."*

Fassil W. Marriam, Founder and Executive Director, Children's Rights and Violence Prevention Fund (CRVPF), Conversation #3

 *We know who we need to resource. We don't want to resource them because we don't trust them, and then we just build structures around that distrust.*

Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Conversation #3

- The children's rights funding ecosystem is splintered with individual donors disconnected from one another, a situation that puts further strains on an under-resourced sector. Funders and, in turn, programmers, tend to take a siloed rather than a collective, intersectional, comprehensive approach to programming. The isolated approach in grant-making also views children separately from families and communities. Moreover, this disconnect has resulted in funders continuing to target symptomatic issues, rather than funding across sectors to address root causes and systemic issues. It has also created competition among organizations for resources. Organizations are siloed across different departments, which are further segmented by specific issues and strategic areas, based on funding streams, with little cross fertilization between departments. Ultimately, the fragmented nature of the funding ecosystem has further de-politicized the children's rights space and stripped children, families and communities of their agencies and decision-making power.

▮▮ *[Youth work] is multi-sectoral, but our funding is siloed and that comes back to the lack of trust, of understanding, and the lack of flexibility.*

Lakshitha Saji Prelis, Co-Chair, Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security and the Director, Children and Youth Programs, Search for Common Ground, Conversation #3

- The children's rights funding ecosystem (and programming) is not rooted in its constituencies. Unlike the women's rights, Indigenous rights, or climate justice fields, the children's rights field is not grounded in the constituencies of children, young people, families, or communities, who do not inform funding and programmatic strategies. The current system is "fearful of youth power"¹⁴, views young people as inherently violent, and speaks about young people as if they will create harm or be further radicalized.¹⁵

▮▮ *We end up in a sector which we do not invest in young people's power, don't recognize their inherent roles in movements... We just have a skewed moral compass in the youth funding and children's rights sector, that isn't rooted in democratic values. We're in any other space we hold up democratic values of representation and constituency as a value. And, for some reason, in this space, we feel like we don't need to, and I think it's a moral failure on our part."*

Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Conversation #3

- Funding requirements are not "fit for purpose" and are rooted in colonialism and adultism. This has created funding structures and mechanisms that are inflexible, layered with bureaucracy, highly restrictive with regards to the use of already minimal resources. For example, donor requirements such as size and registration status of organizations, age requirements for grantees, etc. often disqualify local organizations, and disproportionality affect organizations led by women and young people. These donor requirements are additional barriers to funnel resources directly to young people, local organizations, and their communities.

14 Lakshitha Saji Prelis, Co-Chair, Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security and the Director, Children and Youth Programs, Search for Common Ground, Conversation #3: Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in the Children and Youth Rights Funding Ecosystem.

15 Conversation #3 unpacked the issue around lack of constituency and fear of youth.

Layers and layers of technical requirements that come with it and this is based on a lack of understanding of who young people are and a lack of trust in young people itself, rooted in colonial and racist history... We understand how young people operate... They operate horizontally and informally; often we are forcing them now into institutionalizing of their work... and when you institutionalize it takes the energy out of the work."

Saji Prelis, Conversation #3

[Within grantmaking] we have a lot of assumptions about what's required legally that is not required, it is a custom. These are lots of customs in philanthropy and in the INGO sector that we have taken on as law that are not law. So, I think there has to be a reckoning and questioning of all of these rules and policies that we put in place... and embedded in the idea is that we don't trust the people that are getting the resources. So, many of the 'customs' are colonial and racist because it is the assumption that certain people, Black and Brown people, are not to be trusted with money, and so we have to create rules and barriers... to keep resources away from Black and Brown folks... Customs that we have put in place because of distrust.

Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Conversation #3

- The continued colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and adultism is played out in donor strategies, grant-making decisions, and planning (who and what is funded). Local organizations are not involved in the grant-making or program design process and are viewed solely as recipients, not partners. Many donors prioritize funding mechanisms, packages, and interventions that were developed outside of the respective communities and local contexts.
- Early childhood and child development programming is impacted by patriarchy and paternalism, and we see that in the way that organizations prioritize funding. Despite all the evidence of the benefits of early childhood investments, early education programs constitute only 1-2% of education funding allocations. ¹⁶

[Lack of investment in early childhood] demonstrates the kind of patriarchal, paternalistic roots that really I think inform the whole discourse on the care of children and what we see is a very feminized and overlooked domain, which the State does not step into unless it has to and which is left to individuals or to communities to manage and is viewed as women's work and therefore lacking in status and political interest.

Tina Hyder, Conversation #5

16 Conversation #5.

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[Philanthropy] **the whole thing is a mess, and so my particular role in this mess is to be disruptive in the best way that I can be and to be clear about my imperative which is to move money to my people... and enlist as many people in that project.**

Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Conversation #3

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We have designed a short-term and monetary shaped system that consciously or unconsciously, aid fell into this pack, and its hierarchy that enables one to oblige and count to draw charts to construct histories to construct stories for the winners and to legitimize a system that is individualist, destructive, and dominant.

Miriam Sugranyes, Illustrator and Art Director, The Rights Studio,
Conversation #4

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V Unconscious and Unintended Racism and Colonialism in the International Children's Rights and Protection Structures, Hiring Systems and Leadership

Throughout the conversations, there was both an indirect and direct nod to the unconscious and unintended racism and "whiteness" that continues to be present in the international children's rights structures and day-to-day operations. While these are uncomfortable issues to raise, and are often only privately discussed, it is vital that there is an honest conversation regarding these biases.

"We also have to attend to the relationship between UN/ international NGOs and local organizations on the ground. We have to be willing to challenge the power relations, to look at that, to say who actually on the ground gets to determine what child protection is, what it looks like, what the measures are, because the system is operated in such a way that there is a very clear hierarchy."

Dr. Jason Hart,
Conversation #2

- The industry is defined by a clear hierarchy and layers of power among and between distinct types of organizations (international versus local), as well as between international versus local staff. There is an assumption or awareness that "internationals or outsiders" set the agenda, hold the knowledge, and hold court.
- Several speakers discussed the racism by international organizations and staff that are frequently unconscious and unintentional, often seen in meetings, international conferences, hiring practices and promotions, and other day-to-day interactions with national staff. There is continued contradictions and bias in how we approach protection and resilience within the local community and local organizations. For example, organizational leadership rarely comes from local communities: "On the one hand we don't want to acknowledge the trauma that people have been through...; on the other hand if you look at the way that staffing is structured, if you look at the way that how people who hold power in these spaces are structured they very rarely include people that come from the communities that are affected by this. So, on the one hand we say they're super resilient they don't get affected by trauma and on the other hand we're like well but also, they're not really capable of managing their own problems they're not really capable of real leadership."¹⁷

▮▮ A number of scandals in the UK with organizations such as Oxfam, you know it's very easy just to blame an organization, say it doesn't have proper processes which may or may not be true, but really challenging thing is to look at the deeper mindset that exists which is an obvious manifestation... and we need to look at attitudes that lie beneath

Dr. Jason Hart, Conversation #2

▮▮ What I saw in those meetings was a dominance by the internationals who were faithfully trying to replicate their systems, their paperwork, their way of doing things in the local context. What I also saw I guess as a person of color... was the quiet looks from local people who experienced this imposition as insulting and degrading but did not feel they have the power to actively challenge it because it's the internationals that have resources, so the internationals control the resources and the local people may see racist imposition of inappropriate systems but don't necessarily have the power to challenge that for fear that there will be a political backlash and the communities won't get anything of the resources...

Dr. Catherine Love, Conversation #2

17 Zarlasht Halaimzai, CEO and Co-Founder, Amna Refugee Healing Network (Amna) (formerly Refugee Trauma Initiative), Conversation #5: Confronting Paternalism, Neo-Colonialism, and Racism in the Design and Implementation of Child and Family Programs in Humanitarian and Development Settings.

VI Problematic Use and Repetition of Language: What Impact Does It Have on Those Working Inside Those Organizations?

Another issue that came up repeatedly was the industry's use of jargon and the creation of a vocabulary that is specific to the humanitarian aid and international development industry, rather than the local context, which serves to exclude actors who are not fluent in it. The use of such language and terminologies is another legacy of colonialism and example of power and control.

- Several speakers discussed how the language and different terminologies that define and are used by the international children's right and child protection sector follow old patterns of colonialism. Accordingly, the use of industry-specific jargon needs to be challenged. For example, the use of certain words by donors such as "recipient countries" and "granting" demarcate those who hold the power versus those who are subservient.¹⁸
- International organizations and institutions have their own jargon and language: "the field," "localization," "grassroots," "safeguarding," "capacity building," "monitoring and evaluation (M&E)," "diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)," "shifting power," to name a few. But these words mean extraordinarily little, or meaning is often lost, in the local contexts. The creation of a vocabulary specific to humanitarian aid creates an in-group for those who know it and excludes those who do not. Certain individuals – people who can operate across the 'local' and 'global' community – are expected to translate these concepts and to serve as cultural bridges between the different communities. In the end, these words often end up as just meaningless "buzzwords," "jargon" or "talk" disconnected from the local realities.¹⁹
- Within humanitarian aid, this colonial use of language is further layered by the propaganda and constant repetition of these terms, words, and approaches. The industry acts like and speaks like a choir, working in unison, with continued repetition of certain words.
- The use of language highlights the contradictions and tensions within humanitarian aid, where "language is about empowerment... it's about a voice, a language, of emancipation, and it does the exact opposite."²⁰
- The use of language is also problematic specific to the children's sector in how concepts and models are defined and translated in local contexts: "Before we can even talk about design of programs, we need to talk about the language we use for child development. The way we talk about child development is as if it happens in a vacuum away from the politics and it doesn't."²¹

"A choir is a performance, and it's quite easy to perform if you've been taught the right words. So yes, you're all saying all the right language... but if you are doing political work if shouldn't be a choir, it shouldn't be in unison, there should be fractures, there should be productive disagreements."

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan,
Conversation #1

18 Chernor Bah, Conversation #6

19 Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, Conversation #6

20 Tina Hyder, Conversation #5

21 Zarlasht Halaimzai, Conversation #5.



We need to reframe what is knowledge and by whom this is defined... they need to revisit language as well as to reconnect, to listen, to go back to the roots.

Miriam Sugranyes, Conversation #4



In terms of tracing whiteness, I sort of fear, that we're still operating at a very superficial level and we're not able to see how it's taking its roots into different kinds of language, of ideology, of social movement building, of resistance, of identity politics that is going to be increasingly dangerous both here [United State] and abroad.

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1



Legacy of colonialism, where we see the language, the ways of working as following very old patterns of colonial, flow of power and control and its often-poor communities of color around the world who need to be subjects of literally these sets of interventions, these ways of working, these ways of thinking.

Tina Hyder, Conversation #5



Because the reality is that I think you have a lot of international institutions and organizations and multilateral institutions that they basically have their jargon, they have their language, they have their concepts, and basically unless you familiarize yourself with all of that and that you understand the nuances and frankly the expectations you're just basically lost as a local institution.

Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, President, RMC-Romain Murphy Consulting
Conversation #6

VII Dangers of Box Ticking Exercises: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

"I think that for a long time especially those doing particularly child rights work considered all of these things we're talking about as the things that we work on for other people, others need to work on these issues on diversity, equity, and inclusion. That's not about us because we're the good people."

Chernor Bah,
Conversation #6

Since the decolonizing aid discussions began trending in 2020, numerous international NGOs, UN agencies, multilateral agencies, bilateral donors, philanthropic donors, and other institutions have reflected upon these power imbalances and tried to tackle these issues through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). But, as several speakers noted, the humanitarian aid industry implements processes that are just Band-Aid solutions and "box checking exercises," which allows individuals, donors, and organizations to feel good about themselves but undermines the potential for real change.

In the example of DEI, implementing diversified hiring practices, appointing diverse leadership boards, initiating anti-racism reading clubs and DEI working groups, and releasing public statements are important steps in the process of self-reflection and reform; however, "Diversity, equity, and inclusion, in my mind, is only the means to an end; unfortunately what is happening today is it's seen as the end."²² DEI is not the starting point; commitment to justice is the starting point: "It does not mean that the system is rotting or needs to be completely tossed away. But it's the beginning of that we need to do that. Secondly, it's to create intentional frank conversations that address questions of power and how and who holds power within these organizations. It's not enough to appoint Black CEOs, it's not enough to appoint Asian executives, and people in your board. It's to think about how is power manifested within your organization, who is holding the power, what kinds of ways, and what do we value within this organization?"²³

Speakers noted that these DEI exercises are another example of "Western" imposition of language and framings. DEI exercises have not been introduced or adapted to fit different contexts but instead are "parachuted in."²⁴ The existing DEI framework does not allow the time and space for local organizations to contextualize the discussion, and to adapt and reframe the DEI framework within their local contexts: "This was happening in the US and now you have to recognize it and you should take it on."²⁵ Thus, DEI and anti-racism has evolved into another "buzzword" or a "performative" act in many contexts and countries.²⁶

...because you're operating at the level of performative which is what I see most of what's happening in this realm around whiteness is a very performative reaction to the accusations... question of reckoning becomes subverted with this constant white apology or policing in itself, this kind of practice for me absolves everybody of an actual reckoning with structures.

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1

²² Chernor Bah, Conversation #6.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Dr. Santi Kusumaningrum, Co-Founder and Director, PUSKAPA, Conversation #6: How Can Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion be Understood and Applied in Humanitarian and Development Organizations?

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Refer to Conversation #6.

VIII The Singular Story of the Visual Arts and Storytelling

The international development and humanitarian aid industry, including the children's rights field, continues to perpetuate singular, imbalanced, and exploitative storytelling narratives. The Institute speakers discussed how imagery and the visual arts are often weaponized and used to describe children, youth, and families in ways that reproduce the colonial, racist, and patriarchal narrative of being saved and protected by outside interventions. Conversation #4 unpacks all these problems in detail.

"The entire system, the entire structure, is designed in way that does not allow for imagination or risk-taking at all."

Chernor Bah,
Conversation #6

- Children, families, and their communities have become othered, dominated, and stripped of their power via the aid industry's misrepresentation through imagery and storytelling. The aid industry continues the deliberate use of undignified, inhumane imagery to provoke shame and guilt on the part of the viewer, eliciting feelings rooted in white saviorism. When one thinks of the international children's field, one of the first images that may come to mind is a "dirty," shoeless Black or Brown child with a protruding belly who needs to be saved or, on the flip side, a smiling, clean and happy child who has been rescued and saved, at great risk and sacrifice by foreign, outside support. The perception is that the savior is White, and the children being saved are Black or Brown.
- Humanitarian aid visual storytelling is replicating corporate market strategies and commercializing children and family's pain and suffering. The children's photographs are plastered on organizational websites, reports, fundraising brochures, holiday greeting cards, humanitarian ambassadors' social media feeds, and news outlets. The images used are a powerful vehicle for telling or selling a story. The imagery is used either to fundraise or advocate for a specific issue or an organization. The lack of humanity in the images suggests that the goal of such visual storytelling is not about the realization of children's rights but the promotion of a charity-based model that assuages the viewer's guilt or allows the viewer to feel morally rewarded when they contribute in a way that supposedly "saves" the child. Those whom we are intending to support are prevented from telling their own story; instead, someone far removed from their realities – the holder of power – is deemed the storyteller.
- The tendency is to tell a "singular story"²⁷ of international children and youth rights which can create or further perpetuate stereotypes that do not reflect the complete narrative. The visual representation for Black and Brown people is narrow and there is no space to showcase multiple identities or complexities. The singular story narrative is connected to power, and those who control the narrative are the ones holding the power. Poverty, illness, or violence are the children and families' single story, creating pity and a need to be saved. Often, there is a tendency to focus squarely on either a single victim or a single hero, and if a collective of children and young people are shown, it is often within the lens of perpetrators of violence or society's ills.

27 The writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie coined this term, "singular story," in her Ted Talk, which is discussed in the Institute's [Briefing Paper #4](#).

- Within the existing aid structures and systems, we tend to see either problematic or limited use of arts in programming. Art is being sidelined as a “side project,” or within child protection programs, it is integrated as a play or therapeutic tool, not as a vehicle for self-expression and empowerment. This sidelining of arts programming has its “roots in a very white, Western narrow definition in the aid industry of what constitutes truth and what doesn’t.”²⁸ Visual arts have far more potential within the international children’s rights sector than its current use.

“We understand ourselves through story, our histories, who we are, our identities, and art and media transmit that widely. So, when we’re really looking at the arts visuals the power of visual storytelling, we really need to start by understanding that this is not some side kind of communications tool that the humanitarian industry can use or utilize or kind of raise money over here or do some advocacy over here. In fact, in and of itself visual storytelling is one of the strongest political social and moral tools for change right it is art often grounded in strategy for change. So, when we understand the strategic and powerful tools that they are, and we frame our understanding from that context this shifts the whole conversation to not how can arts be used here or there but how are they being already misused? Because they show up everywhere and everything we do.

Aisha Bain, Conversation #4

- The international children’s rights sector is lacking creativity and imagination, and as a community we have tended to focus on the technical rather than the imaginative. As one of the speakers noted, “imagination has the power, capacity to connect, create threats and opens the door to critical thinking and the power to invoke other possibilities of living, projecting human and children’s rights.”²⁹ Imagination and magical thinking are also how children and young people engage and interact with the world around them. Thus, if we are working on children’s issues, imagination should be at the heart of the work.

28 Meredith Hutchison, Creative Director and Co-Founder, Resistance Communications, Conversation #4.

29 Miriam Sugranyes, Conversation #4



One of the ways in which children, families, and their communities become othered, dominated and stripped of their power is via language and imagery. In relation to that there's a tendency for art and visual storytelling in the nonprofit, and the aid industries, based on a completely single conversation. So, you create art at one point where you extract images or stories at one point you bring it to another point it's shared with funders or policy makers and that's the end. There's no reason why that should not be a circular conversation and there shouldn't be measures of accountability in that process where communities especially Black and Brown communities have the information, the knowledge, the power to understand how their stories are being told and shared and to what impact.

Meredith Hutchinson, Creative Director and Co-Founder, Resistance Communications, Conversation #4



Complexity, the multiple identities that people adopt within the spaces that we all operate in day to day are not acknowledged in programming and in funding and in the way that we conceptualize programs for children.

Tina Hyder, Conversation #5



IX Divergent Conceptions of Self: Individualism versus Collectivism

- All speakers noted that international child protection, family support, and child development programs are embedded in imperial, racist, and patriarchal notions and understanding of what a family should look like and the roles of children within a household. This notion is rooted in the Western model of a nuclear family, which is a foreign concept for numerous cultures and communities around the world. Children, parents, and families are viewed as isolated from their wider communities. This understanding of family and childhood can be problematic and potentially harmful during program designs. In the West or Global North, the primary conception of self is “self-contained individualism.” This conception is in stark contrast with much of the world, in which the concept of self is “ensembled or collective individualism” or “collective approach,” and within the ensemble includes the concepts of extended family and communal and interdependent childrearing. The informal child protection and child welfare systems that exist (and have existed) within different communities and societies tend to be based on the concept of collectivism.³⁰
- In funding and designing international child protection and child development programming, systems, and models, the international aid community has privileged “self-contained individualism” while the collectivist approach is invisible to the aid workers. The funding and programming structures have individualized all aspects of the work from child development to youth activism.
- All speakers stressed that this privileging of individualism (which is rooted in colonialism, patriarchy, and racism) undervalues the existing individuals, resources, and systems of communities. In much of the world, childhood, childrearing, child welfare and, in turn, happiness, grief, and adversity are all collective. Family boundaries are blurry, resources are shared, and skills are exchanged: “[the] sense of collective ownership creates safety and belonging.”³¹ Rather than viewing the collective approach and communal interdependence as protective and a way of providing, the existing aid structures and systems view it as problematic.³²

“Collective approach is very protective but if you juxtapose that experience against some of the programs that are run globally you can begin to see the differences where the concept of nuclear family is imposed on communities that are essentially collective, where women are rendered powerless... and misses the solidarity and the bonds that women create in those kinds of societies to protect themselves and their children and we’re isolating families in the way that the Western paradigm of nuclear family suggests can be really dangerous.”

Zarlasht Halaimzai, CEO and Co-Founder, Amna (formerly Refugee Trauma Initiative), Conversation #5

30 Dr. Catherine Love, Conversation #2.

31 Zarlasht Halaimzai, Conversation #2.

32 Conversation #2 and 5.

- The isolated and individualistic funding and programmatic approach also views the child “as separate from his or her families and communities;”³³ it individualizes the child. However, the root causes of problems cannot be addressed if one is focused only on the individual child, without considering the issues of intergenerational trauma, poverty, and oppression that envelop their families and communities. Across development and humanitarian aid, the emphasis has been on addressing symptoms and individuals, when the need is to address socioeconomic and systemic issues.

▮▮ *The girl child is constructed and celebrated in ways that disconnect her from both community networks and cultural lives...the emphasis on girls’ leadership, its very individualized, individual girl linked to sexual liberation, or the victimhood of violence rather than existing inside of the community and the collective child is either victim or superhero....*

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1

- The child protection sector’s understanding of family and childhood can be rooted in colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, with fixed notions regardless of local context and cultural differences. Hence, the sector’s tendency is to impose a universal understanding of child protection, children’s rights, child development or child welfare (and accordingly parenting, childhood and family) that stems from an extremely specific cultural, political, and socio-economic context and it is applied unreflexively to various other locales. The professionalized field of child protection has not been willing to examine the different experiences of people and how experiences of colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and racism, impacts a society and, accordingly, what protection and safety may mean to them.

33 Fasil W. Marriam, Founder and Executive Director, Children’s Rights and Violence Prevention Fund, Conversation #3: Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in the Children and Youth Rights Funding Ecosystem.

- The lack of contextual understanding is played out within international child protection program design. Programming often misses the complexities around why children, parents, and families behave and interact in certain ways. Programming often neglects to recognize and acknowledge the stress that people feel across different contexts. This fixed approach to culture and inherent assumptions result in exporting of pre-packaged programming (related to parenting, family support, child welfare, children's rights, children's care, violence prevention, etc.). Individuals and organizations who are not from the communities miss the local complexities, rendering these pre-packaged programs ineffective and potentially harmful.

“Cultural difference is abandoned when this proves difficult or time-consuming or when it touches on political sensitivities... when culture becomes uncomfortable its closed down... everything gets reduced to cultural in explaining difference... The challenge is to move beyond a static “mosaic” approach to culture to fully embracing intersectionality, include the issues of class.”

Dr. Jason Hart, Conversation #2

- In numerous international parenting programming, parents' backgrounds in terms of race, class, and gender are perceived not as structural issues to which parents are subjected but as personalized features that undermine their ability to parent effectively. The very concept of transferring skills to parents suggests a deficient model of programming, the granting to them of something they lack. In many international parenting programs, parents are taught skills, an approach that ignores the community dynamics and external factors and are not necessarily appropriate for their specific context and circumstances.

The dangers are that the interventions, the programming that is designed often elsewhere, that's then imposed from a great distance does just not fit it doesn't build on strengths and capacities that communities possess because of the collective nature of the way that most parts of the world operate in terms of kinship and families and therefore those programs don't work.

Tina Hyder, Conversation #5



So, what happens when aid workers, child protection workers come in particularly from overseas, impose their child protection systems, their concepts of social work and psychology, is that it comes into conflict very often with the established collectivist systems that already exist but may be invisible to let's say Western eyes and in these communities that's a problem.

Dr. Catherine Love, Conversation #2



One is the question of, 'Whose universality?'" How do we avoid imposing an understanding of child protection that comes from a very specific cultural, political, economic context and is applied unreflexively to various other very different contexts, so we have a challenge there?

Dr. Jason Hart, Conversation #2



Development and aid is to look at a child and parents in isolation from all the things that are going around them, from other members of their family, from their community and that can push an idea and impose an idea that's actually harms children and their family.

Zarlasht Halaimzai, Conversation #5



X Misconceptions of Womanhood and Motherhood

The international children's rights and child protection sector's understanding of womanhood, motherhood, and culturally constituted gender roles can be problematic and rooted in colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. Such assumptions about women and girls' weaker roles and position in certain societies have sidelined women in programs that purport to empower women and serve families. Programming may in fact be rendering women powerless and stripping them of their agency by conceiving them as powerless. Within this feminized space, funders and programmers often do not acknowledge the important roles of women in family and community life.

For example, within the current international children's rights and child protection sector, donors and organizations are implementing interventions to "shift gender norms" in many contexts, without realizing that context varies. Hence, there is danger of imposing white feminism which does not consider, contextually, what determines empowerment and what gender norms looks like. Who holds the power in defining gender norms?³⁴



Deeper whiteness happening through our understanding of motherhood.

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1



Women's avenues for holding and manifesting power in a local context are invisible to the Western feminists and child protection programming. International aid has tended to overlook, undervalue, or minimize the powerful role of women in certain communities and ignore matriarchal power structures. Around the world, women are powerful leaders in their homes and communities and have a deep understanding of families and empowerment, such as the Māori women ("Cult of the Aunties").



We [Māori community in New Zealand] have a thing known as the 'Cult of the Aunties,' and this is the women, often who are recognized as leaders in their communities and their families who carry a lot of weight and understand whose word carries weight and who understand the situation of families and children in their community, probably a lot better than those who come from outside. So, there's been an undervaluing of the importance of connections and connectedness within communities and status in communities, and that undervaluing has meant the under-utilization of those existing systems and networks within the communities that we are working with in the humanitarian field.

Dr. Catherine Love, Conversation #2

The failure to understand the complex, multifaceted role of women in different contexts is exemplified by interventions in Afghanistan and the West's failure to understand that a women's position in society can render them powerless in some circumstances while giving them power in others:

|| In Afghan culture women have very few public roles, but have agency and power in their own homes, private spaces where women can exercise their power... Experiences of childhood and child development are dependent on matriarchal structures, mothers and grandmothers play significant role in education, social emotional learning, and development of values... [in international child development programs] women are rendered powerless in their own lives and misses the solidarity and bonds that women create in those societies to protect themselves and their children.

Zarlasht Halaimzai, Conversation #5



The power that women have to bring up the next generation, to inform, to imbue values, to support and reinforce identity is not acknowledged and I think we miss huge opportunities by not seeing how powerful women can be within those spaces.

Tina Hyder, Conversation #5



XI De-Politicization of International Children's Rights and Child Protection

One of the key problems raised throughout the six conversations was the lack of political framing or political consciousness within the international children's rights, child development, and child protection sectors. Politics and political violence are completely omitted from funding, programming, and discussions on how we should protect children and families in order to help them thrive and develop in different contexts.

To avoid addressing geopolitics and political violence, donors, policymakers, service providers, and programmers attempt to use technical jargon and approaches, when in fact, the politics are embedded in the programs; and political consciousness are part of children and young people's lives ("child protection has always been political"³⁵). For example, as discussed earlier, although the humanitarian and development sectors do not make their involvement in geopolitics explicit, bilateral funders' decisions about funding and programming priority are often heavily guided by geopolitical considerations—a reality that some bilateral funders are more transparent about than others.



We have completely omitted politics from child development... The way we talk about child development is as if it happens in a vacuum away from the politics, and it doesn't. The number one reason children are harmed is because of political violence. What is preventing children from thriving and reaching their potential? It is political violence...

Zarlasht Halaimzai, Conversation #5



Moreover, the imposition of programmatic child welfare models from high-income countries in other settings around the world, as laid out in [Briefing Paper #5](#) and heard throughout the Institute, in itself represents a kind of politics of domination that mirrors geopolitical realities.”

“The problem is that agencies doing this work are not political enough. They’re not willing to acknowledge the politics that they’re engage with... It reflects the disciplinary background of child protection as a professionalized field amongst disciplines that are not good on politics... But it’s also to do with the timidity of organizations that don’t want to acknowledge the very contested political terrains in which they work. They want to act as if this is a technical and that’s where a kind of avoiding is by framing the whole thing as a technical exercise, rather than profoundly political one.

Dr. Jason Hart, Conversation #2

When geopolitics and political violence overwhelm entire countries and the communities within them, the resultant impacts are far more consequential on children’s well-being than, for instance, individual parents’ abilities and skills to care for their children.

“Afghanistan is a really good example, where for 20 years there have been countless children and family programs that have talked about parenting, so to kind of help parents better protect their children, whilst missing the larger political context, where the countries that are intervening or involved in Afghanistan, that’s the thing that’s making children unsafe. It’s the violence and that violence has a political cause and that parents and families have very very little to do and are totally powerless and, in that circumstance, the biggest thing that is currently a danger to Afghan children and families is what’s going on politically... so that’s the thing that is causing the most amount of harm and that’s totally omitted from any kind of discussion of how we should protect... The biggest danger to Afghan children and families is what’s going on politically.

Zarlasht Halaimzai, Conversation #5

In addition to international child protection donors and organizations papering over the ways in which their programs are part of geopolitical considerations, programs themselves tend to conceptualize children as de-politicized agents. Within international children's rights, the de-politicizing process begins when the child is quite young. The sector often constructs a child, or specifically a girl, as a sexualized victim; there are significant issues that arise when children are framed in this way.

/// You're not able to see her as a political actor, you don't expect political action from this figure... So, it's a very complicated convolution that the white feminist does in these contexts and in determining what empowerment should look like right a kind of traditionalist feminine empowerment to see there to see their politics.

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1

Specific child development, child protection or children's rights programming and interventions can also play a role in dulling or re-directing the political sensibilities of children. If children are seen only via the lens of rescuing and protection, where will political perspectives be placed? It is not their parents or communities that are politicizing children, as often assumed by the international community, but it is the child and young person's direct tie to violence that is politicizing them.³⁶

This attempt to omit politics in program design accounts for huge populations of children and young people chronically unprotected from political violence. This lack of constituency (also see funding section above), political framing, and political engagement within the broader international children's rights field also makes it difficult to engage in political, radical, and constructive discussions around power imbalances and movement building.

36 Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1.

3

Re-imagining New Visions and Framings:

Recommendations, Solutions, Next steps and Way forward





There is no privileging in the reimagining of the future of aid and whose visions are centered. There is a deep fundamental and global responsibility of those institutions to stop causing harm and to reimagine and redesign and implement change with those who are most affected at the center of that redesign.

Aisha Bain, Conversation #4



Whose vision and framing should drive the reimagining of the future of aid and international children rights field? It's about power. It's not about aid industry allowing children to input into a vision, it's about centering the visions of Black and Brown children in the reimagining of the industry and field.

Meredith Hutchison, Conversation #4



Can you break a system from within?
Do you have to apply pressure all places?

Chernor Bah, Conversation #6



The speakers outlined several recommendations to help us to re-image and reframe the international children's rights sector. We have organized the recommendations below into key themes. As all the speakers noted, to effect radical change and reform, all key stakeholders — chief executives, policymakers, donors, practitioners, academics, researchers, students, artists, storytellers, community members, children and young people, parents, and activists – need to come together as a part of a transnational collective movement to reconstruct and dismantle the international children's rights sector.

SOLUTIONS



Click on the solution to
go directly to the page

I**SHIFT MINDSETS****IV****LOCAL ACTION****II****MUTUAL
ACCOUNTABILITY****V****BE IMAGINATIVE****III****PRACTICE HUMILITY****VI****POLITICIZE CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS**

Solution is to get cynical about this system... and not be so earnest about your strategies. The extent that we are clear about the brokenness of the system then it's the extent that we can begin to move and develop new systems of balance not power. Get money to these movements that are trying to disrupt and dismantle these systems of oppression.

Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Conversation #3



I Shift Colonial, Racist, Adultism, and Patriarchal Mindsets within Yourself and Your Organization

The speakers repeatedly articulated how the international development and humanitarian aid industry (including the child protection and children's rights field) has its roots in colonial, racist, patriarchal, and adultism mindsets and systems of oppression. To implement radical change, we need to begin to create a space for personal and organizational self-reflection to shift our mindsets and "decolonize ourselves." Holding frank conversations (such as the Institute) and asking ourselves tough questions about the industry can help to begin this process.

Create space for frank conversations and critical self-reflection to interrogate assumptions and shift mindsets

To address the systems inequities and dysfunctions, organizational leaders and senior management should provide the supportive space and time for staff at all levels to reflect upon their own assumptions as well as their own understandings and experiences of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression and power imbalances. Organizations should create a space in which individuals can tackle hard topics and questions while remaining safe for self-reflection and growth among those who participate.

Questions to get you started

One key outcome of various forms of oppression such as racism and sexism are that individuals are encouraged to stay in their places, remain content with what they have, and not ask any tough questions. But in order for things to change, real questioning needs to be done by organizations and individuals working in the international children's rights/protection sector. We need to step back, "sit in the discomfort of our failures," shift our mindsets, and honestly question our motivations. To effectively redress power, we need to begin to ask ourselves and our respective organizations uncomfortable and deep questions and move this discussion beyond another "box ticking exercise."

The Institute's speakers have recommended the questions below for you and your respective organizations to start the process. These questions are the tools to help you, individually, or within your organization, to unpack the power imbalances and to help implement the recommended next steps.

- What does the community want and believe? How can we start listening to communities in a fundamental, meaningful, sustainable way?
- Why is an international organization or a donor deemed the "expert" and not those living the communities? What would it mean for our practice to flip the script and to understand that those whom the international humanitarian sector has typically deemed "beneficiaries" are, in a profound sense, the experts about their own lives and situations? Whose knowledge is considered expertise, and why?

- Why do we continue to fund a paternalistic system that disempowers those that it intends to empower?
- Who is holding the power and resources within our organization or wider sector and industry? And why? How is this power manifested within your organization or wider sector? What mechanisms of shifting power are available to us? How can we activate the levers to shift power?
- Who determines what the child protection sector prioritizes geographically and programmatically? Does this prioritization reflect the lived realities of children and families around the world?
- What is currently valued? Whose truth? Who is being listened to? Who is being believed? Whose visions are being centered?
- Who is demanding the images, narratives, and stories that currently shape and define the children's rights field, and for what purpose? How do we gather these images and stories? Who is authoring and owning this process? How can change happen in the communications and the visual arts and in the integration of visual arts in the child protection field?
- What do we deem as good versus bad? What does good even mean?
- Who determines the meaning of empowerment?
- How are we changing our processes and structures to be accountable for the very people you say you work with and for (or want to "help" the most)?
- How do we become more responsible and accountable to the people we serve?
- How do we measure success? How should we measure success?
- How do we bring integrity and humility into the change process?
- Who do we need to become to dismantle the racist, colonial, and patriarchal structures from within?
- What do we need to unlearn to reframe and shift? What do we need to learn to do this work better?
- Am I willing to assume risks and to fail forward as I move toward change? How can I push my organization to take risks?"
- Ultimately, the question is: am I willing to change?

II

Better Understand and Challenge Power and Ensure Mutual Accountability

As noted earlier, shielded by good intentions and culture differences, there is a lack of accountability within the humanitarian aid structures and organizations. To reconstruct international children's rights, there is an urgent need to examine and call out the vested interests of the industry and hold its structures accountable.

To uphold accountability as a sector, we need to be better at understanding, critiquing, and challenging the status quo and powerholders. To effectively understand the power levers, vested interests, and power imbalances, and, to eventually relinquish power, it is recommended that organizations clearly assess the power and privilege they currently hold and have a clearer understanding of how power is manifested and situated within different contexts and organizations. As donors and programmers, we also need to explore indigenous power and community resourcing (such as community philanthropy), which exists but is overlooked. There also needs to be the recognition that the inventions and innovations are emerging from within the communities themselves: "we keep looking for innovation, I think in lots of ways rather than that what we know the innovation is not going to come from philanthropy it's going to come from the folks that are actually doing the work."³⁷ Across communities around the world, change is happening even without resources from international philanthropy and NGOs, bilateral donors, or UN agencies.

We must challenge, critique, and force accountability on those in power, including donors, international organizations, and other powerholders. Grantees and recipients of foreign aid must challenge donors (including your organization's donors), even if it means losing funding, status, and power:



**Rebellion is part of your political work
as a grantee and pushing against those
that are funding you.**

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1



³⁷ Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Executive Director, Children Rights Innovation Fund, Conversation #3: Confronting Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy in Funding.

For example, donors and partners can begin to challenge the “donor vs. recipient” country paradigm (“everything flows from this paradigm”³⁸). Another shift can be to move away from the language of “granting” to “giving” (e.g., Mackenzie Scott’s Foundation uses the term giving).

In addition to challenging the funding structures, it is imperative that embedded organizational hierarchal and oligarchical power imbalances are challenged. Why are UN agencies and/or international NGOs the holders of power in the ecosystem? Why do they exist in perpetuity? One measure of accountability is to ensure that organizations have in place exit strategies and structures to leave the communities safely and with integrity. The exit strategies can include guidelines and benchmarks to allow for the gradual and sustainable closure of programming led by external actors and equitable partnerships with local organizations.



In the spaces that I work in, white feminist money has more power than the US government, than USAID, in the lives of the women that I work with. So, I absolutely have a right to critique them.

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1



Aid should be about ending the need for aid... industry has lost touch with that.

Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, Conversation #6



III

Practice More Humility, Trust, Respect, Flexibility, and Openness

All speakers spoke about the need for funders, CEOs, program designers, policymakers, academics, and other actors to practice more humility, openness, trust, and flexibility in their funding, program design and implementation, and academic scholarship. Avoid the temptation to jump to solutions, especially solutions that you are designing internally within your organizations. The solutions may lie elsewhere, so in considering how to make your organization more equitable, inclusive, and anti-racist, design processes that center the voices of those whom you are purporting to “help” from the very beginning.

Be humble and enter a community as a guest and student

We need to be better at understanding the different contexts in which we operate by listening, learning, sharing power and resources, and practicing humility and trust in our relationships and engagements at the community level. Thus, donors and programmers need to shift their mindsets and assumptions about the local community by valuing their knowledge and power.

Donors and funders need to give space and time and tools as well to listen to children, to listen to young people or youth to listen to adolescent girls, to listen to families, communities so that we have a holistic understanding before we start the grantmaking.

Fassil W. Marriam, Conversation #3

We acknowledge that we've been working in their worlds without adequate permission and without adequate understanding... I'm thinking a lot about whose voices are getting centered and in what ways. And so, I think we tend to think of those we study or those we intervene upon as it were as objects of our knowledge, our agenda, our charity, our support and instead I think we need to start thinking about them as our teachers first and foremost and then maybe we earn the right to be their partners right. But let's really fully flip it first.

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Conversation #1

The practice of humility amongst humanitarian workers, child protection workers, I would argue, is a very important part because humility allows to open our eyes and open our ears, to understand and value other people's points of view.

Dr. Catherine Love, Conversation #2

Be open and flexible in defining who you partner with and how

Donors and programmers need to broaden their understanding of partnerships — partner with “unlikely partners” and move beyond the usual partnerships of NGOs; work with local private sectors and ask how they can contribute to the work as a partner.

“Grantmakers have to be serious about flexibility. We have to be flexible. We have to give space and time for our partners to make mistakes, and sometimes to look at some new ideas so in this way we can make learning more open, more flexible so that people can... learn and dare to expect the unexpected.

Fassil W. Marriam, Conversation #3

Take a holistic, flexible, and long-term approach to grant-making

For example, vast majority of community institutions are not formal or are unregistered and they need to be as seen as part of movement building and grant-making.

“Most of these organizations are born in that community; they’re there, and the founders and most of the workers are in that community, so it’s important to think long term. If we’re thinking of movement building, these are the nucleus for movement building to promote children’s and youth rights and protection.”

Fassil W. Marriam, Conversation #3

Take a more flexible approach to monitoring, evaluation, learning, and measuring outcomes

Donors, researchers, and programmers can shift reporting and monitoring and evaluation systems to measure what truly matters to communities and incorporate community-led indicators and processes (e.g., visual storytelling or collective impact model).³⁹ For example,

Randomized control trial (RCT) is not always appropriate as a way of demonstrating the efficacy of a particular intervention, of a way of working with the community. Let’s find other ways to actually show what works without imposing something that might fit very well in a very nice calm stable community with a particular population but doesn’t work for everyone and everywhere.

Tina Hyder, Conversation #5

39 Conversation #4 discussed how visual storytelling can be one avenue for measurement. Fassil W. Marriam discussed collective impact model in Conversation #3.

“ We’ve institutionalized how we believe donors must receive information and how they ask for it, who’s demanding what... it’s become institutionalized that donors need this kind of imagery and these kinds of stories...

Aisha Bain, Conversation #4

“ White Western donors in particular look for very specific things whether it’s very prescribed narratives or more often it’s data and that is privileged extremely so over what Black and Brown, and Indigenous people have to say about their reality and their experiences.

Meredith Hutchison, Conversation #4

Practice respect by centering non-professional and informal workers

Professionalization of the child protection field has, in fact, created less space for listening to and learning from community voices, rather than more, and we should be working in the opposite way. We need to pay closer attention to the impact of professionalization and show more respect to the local communities by centering them in the funding and programming decision-making processes.

“ The ‘cult of the Aunties’ – what would they want to see happen? What the priorities for their families and communities? What are the things that are going to make life better for the children and their families? And what can international workers do to support them and get resources as much as possible to them to set up their own systems.

Dr. Catherine Love, Conversation #2

Form equitable and mutually beneficial funding and programming partnerships

One way to practice humility and respect is for donors and implementing organizations to place particular emphasis on the notion and practice of equitable and mutually beneficial funding and programming partnerships.

What should donors and implementing organizations do?⁴⁰

Equitable Grant Structures

Revisit and review your grant structures and do not ask organizations to sign an agreement when the owner of intellectual property rights is you - the donor.

Equitable Reporting Protocols

When you are asking an organization to sign onto the donor's or implementing organization's protocols (e.g., DEI protocols or sexual violence reporting mechanisms), you should first ask if the organization has one and you – as a donor or international organization – should sign onto the organization's respective protocols.

Realistic Expectations and Demands

Revisit what you expect and demand of an organization. For example, with regards to sustainability, do not provide initial funding then expect organizations to be able to refinance after funding has run out, as that may not be a realistic option for many organizations.

40 Dr. Santi Kusumaningrum presented these recommendations during Conversation #6.

IV Fund and Partner with Local Community Organizations and Young People



**It's not about giving 'them' the space or the voice,
because they already have this voice.**

Miriam Sugranyes, Conversation #4



Organizations and individuals within the international children's rights industry need to shift colonial, racist, patriarchal, and adultism mindsets and fund, partner, and design programming with local communities and young people. This can be done by, as discussed in the preceding section, practicing humility and respect, creating opportunities for communities to tell their own stories, and ensuring that many individuals within the community, not just a few, are the nucleus of the work.

Interrogate our assumptions and trust local communities

We need to interrogate our assumptions about local communities, and trust local conceptions of resilience, families (individualism vs. collectivism), and matriarchal structures as we design programming. Donors and programmers are not funding and partnering with local organizations because they believe in a lack of local capacity, strength, and knowledge; the resultant relationship is thus one of distrust, rooted in colonialism, adultism, racism, and patriarchy. But local organizations, "born in these communities," are the ones that understand the local context and needs of children and families. The local community organizations and structures (including children, young people, families, private sector, etc.) are the ones who manage humanitarian crises, live with the consequences of humanitarian interventions, and remain long after international organizations have left. Local communities should oversee their own needs and future.

Provide communities with the time and space to do the work

Organizations and funders should prioritize ways of working that provide adequate time, space, and resources to allow communities to describe what it is they need; and, for donors to be able to effectively listen to children, families, and communities and to provide support that aligns with their self-expressed needs. We need to ensure that programs proactively work toward understanding the contextual and cultural complexities related to children and young people, parenthood and caregiving, families, and communities in each setting where work will happen. Funding and programming design must start from the perspective of the specific context and that people come with all kinds of life experiences, which impacts how families work together to keep themselves safe.

Human centered design

Organizations and donors must shift the existing paradigm within humanitarian aid by ensuring that affected communities are central to funding, program design, and direct service provision by engaging and harnessing the local community's "leadership, views, knowledge, and wisdom"⁴¹ at every stage of the processes. For example, we should re- rethink the use of pre-packaged conceptions and programs, which may not meet the needs of parents, children, and communities. If you can already imagine what a program would look like before you have done a needs and context assessment, the program is unlikely to be a culturally and contextually appropriate response. As one of the speakers noted, "rather than funding a package, fund an approach that is about a human-centered forward design and that is about privileging the voices and experiences of communities and leadership of communities."⁴²

"Young people are demanding transparency. They are demanding horizontal leadership and wanting to be part of solutions and to be engaged as partners at the same time. And they want to feel like they are part of something greater than themselves."

Saji Prelis,
Conversation #3

Trust children and young people

Donors and programmers need to remove the layers and structures of distrust and adultism, and instead partner and fund children and young people's power. This will in turn create trust-based partnerships with young people. Begin the conversation with young people and community members with not what you, as a donor want or need, but with an "I trust your vision."⁴³ Accordingly, children and young people should be part of the design process; authoring and owning their story and the programming (including arts) that they are creating.

□□ Funding, what I've seen, is transactional in nature but at the heart of what we are talking about is a relational issue and trust issue. And young people see themselves as beneficiaries and not partners in the funding ecosystem.

Saji Prelis, Conversation #3

[Refer to Pop-Up Box](#) for examples of donors moving the philanthropic sector towards addressing the root causes of children's rights violations and understanding young people as primary constituency.

41 This was discussed extensively during Conversation #5 by Zarlisht Halaimzai and Tina Hyder and during Conversation #3 by Fasil W. Marriam.

42 Tina Hyder, Conversation #5.

43 Saji Prelis, Conversation #3.

V Role of the Visual Arts, Storytelling, and Art Programming: How Can Art Decolonize and Reconstruct Children's Rights, Child Protection and Family Programs?



Illustration have a lot of potential especially now. You can use it to stand up for your values. You can use it to retell histories. Also, you can use it to debunk myths, explain facts."

Galuh Indri Wiyarti, Conversation #4



Visual arts and storytelling can be the door to shift power imbalances and connect communities

Visual arts can help dismantle racism and colonialism by both highlighting power and exposing power imbalances. Art can be a way to breakdown assumptions, play on the meaning of the image or story, allow those on the margins, or "forgotten voices," to have their voices heard and their images seen. Programmers should work to include artists in their work, positioning them as facilitators who can collaborate with community members to create spaces where art becomes a vehicle for narratives and images that convey the hopes, wishes, needs, and goals of the community. How can you build out a space for other people to share their stories and what technical expertise can you offer to support them in translating those ideas, their stories, their thoughts?

Visual arts and storytelling can be transformative, especially if the artist is using a medium to tell their own story, to create a new visual or narrative discourse.

Historically, racial, and social justice movements have involved artists and storytellers, whose imagery and language allow people to visualize the injustices and the possibility of transformation in new ways. The visual arts have far more potential within the international children's rights sector than the current space they occupy. Children, youth, and young community leaders are constantly creating visual and narrative art, and there is a real possibility of catalyzing the arts and arts programming as a vehicle for self-expression and empowerment. ([Refer to Pop-Up Box](#) for examples of visual arts programming.)

“I really like the idea about before I create these [Institutes] illustrations that you want me to give the power to the children, not the adults. And it’s really intriguing to create the artwork, the process. It has its own freedom, like people can reflect on it and they can think about it afterwards. They can have their own opinion after they look at the illustration.”

Galuh Indri Wiyarti, Conversation #5

“The arts and visual storytelling is important for the sheer beauty of it, it is a gift of the human animal, and it is one of the most powerful tools for political, social, and moral change.”

Aisha Bain, Conversation #4

Recreate what knowledge, evidence, and storytelling looks like by centering the power of visual arts and storytelling

The international children’s rights industry needs to recognize that truth and knowledge comes from a multitude of mediums and processes, including through visual arts. Across history, Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities have been using the arts and visual storytelling as a way of telling their truth and sharing knowledge. We should harness these indigenous forms of storytelling. Art and the creative process can also give power to the children and not the adults; it provides children with ownership and authorship. Art can be a way to ask children what they want to be and how they would like to make choices for themselves.

Children create art everywhere... at every country you go to. You almost would look at that and say clearly this is one of the most central ways I have of understanding the communication from children supporting how they wish to communicate to the world and supporting how adults understand and can work with that. It seems like the most natural thing and somehow, we keep stamping it out right as not serious. If we were to talk about children’s leadership, children protection, change driven from and with children, we start from their place of knowledge, communication, visualizing the world, and understanding and we work from there, not from the places that we demand they start from.

Aisha Bain, Conversation #4

Centering imagination

At the center of visual arts is imagination, which is currently missing within the international children’s rights sector. Moving forward, imagination should be centered within funding, programming, and policy development.

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The role of art and visual storytelling at its crux is to push, shift, challenge, move audiences in the aid industry."

Meredith Hutchison, Conversation #4

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There is real power in integrating visual communications, visual art into programming for children, that becomes so many things. It can become a protective factor, a healing factor, an imaginative explorative educational factor, a communications factor, an advocacy factor, a connection factor to themselves and to other children, a way in which to really seek and explore change, a way for adults to meet children where they are at, where they want to be and support their communication... So, when you think about it from those elements it becomes how would we not integrate this into everything that we're doing with children."

Aisha Bain, Conversation #4

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Art has the power to invoke the untold, so some sort of uncovering what is in the roots which needs to recover despite the contradiction and creating connections where they might not be obvious."

Miriam Sugranyes, Conversation #4

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VI Be Aware of Your Political Involvement, and Be Explicit About Your Political Commitments

Promote and internalize Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) and justice

DEI should not be a box-ticking exercise but an explicitly political commitment to social justice that will require organizations to reform themselves radically and to work in concert as an industry to create systems-wide changes in the humanitarian and development industry. This reform may include radicalizing the conversation about reparations and foreign aid and interrogating why certain communities are living in poverty and refuting political decisions that underlie our acceptance of its causes. Reparations is not only a call for monetary compensation; it is also a demand for radical justice and questioning the acceptance of vast global inequalities and examining the accountability of the colonial and imperial system.

“The foundation of this conversation is to what end and what’s the end? It’s about radically challenging the system and acknowledging that the aid institutions as constructed are part of a system of oppression for Black and Brown bodies. And that we need to, while we are at the same time feeding the children, immunizing them, and doing all those nice things that we pat ourselves on the back for, understand that we are part of the system that creates the problem in the first place that makes you need to feed those children and immunize the children. So, while you’re doing that you need to have a very clear stance on what you are doing as well and how you’re working towards that includes in your structures, in your system, who you hire, who has power, audits your organization, about how you progress.

Chernor Bah, Conversation #6

In addition, to implement DEI properly, it is recommended that you start with a context assessment, so that the DEI exercise is rooted in specific contextual understanding and realities, rather than parachuted in. What are the diversity and justice realities within a specific context?

Engage politically

International children’s rights work is inherently political, so actors must take the time to consider their political engagement and to be clear about their political commitments.

“We can be roadblocks or door openers.

Saji Prelis, Conversation #3

Rebellious risk-taking and cultivation of community of rebellion

As we move forward with these conversations, it is important for people to take risks as individuals, organizations, and as a wider sector, and to create a community of rebellion. It is important to shift the burden of risks and rebellion onto the West/Global North and force accountability onto them. The danger and risks of challenging and critiquing power are much higher in the Global South than in the West/Global North. It takes courage to challenge the status quo and if one's career and family livelihood is tied into the international hierarchy of power and resources, it is even riskier.

Small acts of rebellion to put your own equity on the line and giving up space and power for someone else

Every decision that you make as an individual or an organization is a political act that holds the responsibility of reapportioning power and privilege in updated terms and works to redress power. This includes which organizations you decide to fund, speakers that you invite to join a panel or conference, individuals that you hire, boards that you appoint, and so forth.⁴⁴

Tackle careerism

Careerism is increasingly the hallmark of the aid industry. To foster radical change, it is important to encourage people to take professional risks rather than to take the step that is best for their status, career, and hierarchal progression within an organization.



Being in the room is the beginning, right, it's the beginning then of the work. It's quite remarkable how rooms can change if you're prepared to, I think do that kind of work and for me that really is centering the voices of those who have been on the margins.

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Conversation #1



It is also recommended that academia expands the disciplines of international child rights, child protection and family welfare to allow for more debate within the field.

Acts of rebellion for academics and scholars

Academics must be willing to take risks and use the independence of academia to change the shape of conversations and to write and speak independently. Academic scholars have the responsibility to help students develop critical mindsets that can interrogate what is going on in an impartial and independent way. Academics also have the responsibility to teach students to question motives and content; understand the politics of data; and understand power dynamics of scientific evidence. This can be done by the simple act of including majority female scholars or scholars work from the Global South – “voices from the margins” – in academic course syllabus or journal citations. This can instantly shift the conversations and power imbalances inherent in academic and international organizations.⁴⁵

It is also recommended that academia expands the disciplines of international child rights, child protection and family welfare to allow for more debate within the field. The child protection field has been shaped by certain disciplines and they jealously guard their dominance within the field. Accordingly, the field of child protection needs to be more multidisciplinary, engaging across different sectors: anthropology, sociology, diplomacy, economics, political science, visual arts, peacebuilding, among others. In turn, this shift in scholarship can shift programming and encourage joint programming across sector (e.g., linking child development and income generation programming).

Expand our political imagination of resistance and build a transnational movement and community of rebellion that can challenge the entrenched nature of the international development, humanitarian aid, and philanthropic industries

“The reality is that to rebel in these spaces, whether it’s an NGO or the UN or the [US] State Department it’s kind of a lonely endeavor. Particularly for young women, I would urge you not to be put off by the risk of rebellion but to know that as soon as you make that first step you are going to be held in community by other women.”

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1

I think one of the things personally I really want to commit my own life to is to create a truly transnational movement that can challenge the entrenched nature of this [humanitarian] aid sector and the way that it wields its power and oppresses us. And we can do that and but to do that we need for... us...to connect a little bit more and connect and organize ourselves and... to do that we also need the freedom to think and imagine and that comes with also the freedom with the kinds of resources we have access to...

Chernor Bah, Conversation #6

45 Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay (Conversation #1), Dr. Jason Hart (Conversation #2), and Dr. Santi Kusumaningrum (Conversation #6) discussed the role of academia in decolonizing aid.

// Collective power is vital and critical, and it is not to be feared.

Dr. Ramatu Bangura, Conversation #3

// You do see a new form of rebellion, for me that's important to be able to cultivate that form of rebellion among people who are receiving money, cultivating a conscious resistance.

Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Conversation #1

As the Institute's speakers noted, rebelling against and critiquing the international development, humanitarian aid and philanthropic community – within UN agencies, international NGOs, or donors – is a “lonely” and marginalizing undertaking. Thus, there is need to connect, organize, and create a new community for collaboration to alleviate the isolation and support each other.

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Across history, true system changes have been inspired by people coming together in community of leaders (“leader full”) and movements. As all speakers noted, we need to create a transnational movement that can challenge the existing norms and entrenched nature of the aid industry. Movement orientation needs to be embedded within international humanitarian aid. Accordingly, we need to harness and leverage long-term, collective funding power to co-invest in movement-building. We need to cultivate organizations across communities and begin micro-level organizing to work together within organizations and within donors. We have begun to see this happen through increasing Global South-Global South connections and shifting alliances. We need to further cultivate these new forms of rebellions to build and organize transnational movements across communities.

Annex - Pop-Up Boxes

Examples of Donors Moving the Philanthropic Sector Towards Addressing the Root Causes of Children's Rights Violations and Understanding Young People as Primary Constituency

Flexible, innovative funding mechanisms can be one avenue to address inherent power inequalities and imbalances in the children's rights/protection funding ecosystem. They are laboratories for learning to effect radical change. These funding mechanisms are designed to be flexible in design and implementation to get resources close to the community level with minimal barriers. This results in the funding mechanisms (or respective donors), rather than recipients, enduring most of the potential barriers. If donors can absorb, as an institution, as much of the barriers as possible, it will free up space for young people and community organizations to receive the funds and do their work.

During Conversation #3 and Conversation #6, the Institute highlighted several funds that are directly funding young people, children, and community members who are working to dismantle power imbalances:



Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF)

is a collective challenge to reinvigorate and transform the global children's rights field by building power with youth activists and their allies. CRIF is a grantmaking fund and donor learning community. In partnership with funders, youth activists, practitioners, and allies, CRIF cultivates innovation and collaboration to dismantle the root causes of children's vulnerability and strengthen the root drivers of their well-being.



Children's Rights and Violence Prevention Fund (CRVPF)

is a newly established regional intermediary organization based in Kampala, Uganda. CRVPF provides grants and technical supports to community organizations and local NGOs to prevent violence and build adolescent girls' power in Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia.



Youth, Peace, and Security Fund is a new fund, launched in 2021, to catalyze and mainstream youth leadership in peacebuilding across the globe.



Purposeful is a feminist hub for girls' activism, rooted in Africa and working all around the world. Purposeful houses the With and For Girls Fund, the world's first Africa rooted global fund for girl activists and their allies, resourcing girls resistance across the globe.

Annex - Pop-Up Boxes

Examples of Visual Arts Programming

The Institute's speakers discussed how artists are pushing back, retelling stories, and using visual arts and arts programming to protect and empower communities and, more broadly, to reconstruct and to reframe children's rights. In their stories, children, young people, and their communities are no longer passive beneficiaries but holders of their voice and agency.

Conversation #4 included speakers who are all pushing the boundaries on telling stories, creating imagery and art programming in ways that help us think about children's rights and child protection in new ways – ways that both reject and critique the imperialist visual and narrative language of the past while creating space for creativity, re-imagination, rebellion, resistance, joy, and self-expression. Examples highlighted in the conversations include the following:



Galuh Indri Wiyarti is an Illustrator and Graphic Designer. Galuh created the illustrations for the Reconstructing Children's Rights Institute.



Vision Not Victim: Co-founded by Aisha Bain and Meredith Hutchinson, a global girl-driven program that provides creative platforms to unleash the power of adolescent girls, address the violence they face and work towards gender equality, supporting girls, parents, and communities to create safer and more supportive environments for girls.



The Rights Studio: Co-founded by Miriam Sugranyes and Veronica Yates, a creative hub for people and organizations to engage on human rights issues affecting children, young people and future generations through the arts and other creative expressions.



Refer to **Briefing Note #4** for additional examples of art programming.



Reconstructing **Children's Rights**