ABSTRACT: Though international children’s rights have been criticized for being based on western conceptions of ideal childhood that do not reflect reality for the majority of the world’s children, globalized understandings of childhood have made it a crucial barometer for developing countries’ national sovereignty and development. Taking Uganda as a case study, this paper examines how childhood in developing countries is influenced by these interpellated global discourses. Despite their contradictions with local cultural concepts of childhood, international children’s rights discourses have proliferated so effectively that children themselves now place emphasis on their rights as essential to attaining full national and global citizenship by negotiating the various local and global identity discourses about ideal childhoods amidst challenges from adult authority, poverty, and politics. Hence, both nations and their children are learning to harness the authority of universal children’s rights discourses and childhood identity in order to gain crucial entitlements.

“...the last decade has seen nothing less than a revolution in the way in which we approach the challenge of responding to children and youth in Africa. That is the revolution in the rights of the child.”
— Urban Jonsson,
UNICEF Regional Director of Eastern and Southern Africa
(de Waal and Argenti 2002: ix)

On the fortieth anniversary of Uganda’s independence in 2002, New Vision, the national newspaper, printed an editorial called ‘A Young Nation’. Accompanied by a picture of children studying under a tree in rural Uganda, the opinion piece compared Uganda to a middle-aged person to assess its progress since independence.

AS INDEPENDENT Uganda turns 40 today, millions are reflecting on what has been and what could have been, and are also focusing on what can still be. In the human life, 40 is a relatively mature age — independent from parental care, raising a family, educating children, and having the best things of life.
Many times, we expect our country to develop at the same rate as we individuals. We want the country to go through the cycle of life at the very same pace as our parents, our peers, our children. We also expect the country’s progress to be smooth all the way.

These expectations are illusory. Just like an individual’s life is full of ups and downs… so too is the country’s.

But in this time, we have also recorded economic growth, empowered millions politically and socially, and *established ourselves as a real nation*. Relative to others… we are still a young nation who can only hope that the ups outweigh the downs as we continue our growth through history (New Vision 2002, my emphasis).

This editorial suggests that the nation has a life cycle, in which it is, compared to other nations, still a ‘child.’

Childhood and nationhood are thus inextricably linked by the analogy of development. This paper will examine this link through the ethnographic case study of Uganda, East Africa, where the proliferation of international children’s rights discourses challenge local concepts of childhood, prompting children and their interlocutors to reconsider the multiple meanings of childhood and nationhood through the idiom of development. Local definitions of children and childhood are being transformed by the influence of international organizations and their guiding philosophies about the ‘universal’ child, but these constructions belie the fact that childhood is also a culturally specific idea. Though local definitions may be accepted for the purpose of facilitating national development, it is important to understand how these global discourses of children’s rights translate into local praxis.

*‘Develop the Nation, Develop the Child’*

Ugandans’ belief that early behavior is crucial to the later development of the person or the nation is signified in the Luganda proverb, *Akakyama amamera: tekagololekeka*: “That which is bent at the outset of its growth is almost impossible to straighten at a later age.” (Kilbride and Kilbride 1990: 89).

Uganda’s political independence got off to a crooked start, and now Ugandans are turning to young people to straighten out a young nation. Through international development discourse, the Ugandan government has come to subscribe to the idea that children’s welfare is crucial to the growth of the nation as well as the security of the state.
This anthropomorphizing of the nation is not unusual: Thomas Hylland Eriksen points out that, “Like a person, the nation is endowed with a biography by its imaginers, and it is presumed to have gone through phases of self-development. Its past, like that of the individual, is being fashioned so as to make sense of the present and, like the ideal bourgeois individual, it is being symbolically represented as sovereign, integrated, and inhabited with a soul” (Eriksen 1997: 103). In Uganda, the soul of the nation was deeply bruised before it had a chance to develop. If “development itself can be defined as increasing the capabilities and choices of individuals (Sen 1999)” (de Waal and Argenti 2002: 8), then rights protection is important in assuring national growth and development as much as personal growth and development. Because of its metaphorical connection to national growth, children’s rights discourse has become a crucial aspect of the construction of the child citizen. The notion of childhood in many countries is thus being reconceptualized in relation to the nation in order to accommodate development goals.

The language of ‘rights’ can be easily seen as an imposed global discourse. The presumption is that when the traits attributed to the ‘universal child,’ which are typically informed by western values, are absorbed by local value systems in developing countries, they free children from the negative constraints of traditional culture. While many of the tenets of ideal childhood propounded by organizations such as UNICEF do help raise the role of children in Ugandan society, they do not always translate across the social and cultural landscape in ways productive to development goals. In some respects, universalized notions of children’s rights set children apart from local society where they might otherwise be integrated in vital ways – in the labor force, for example. Thus, the ways in which the language and practice of children’s rights has proliferated from western ideology to public policy in developing countries like Uganda, the emergent trope of ‘the ideal child’ in these countries contains crucial contradictions that prevent it from becoming fully functional in local praxis. Though one has to start somewhere, this fact challenges the common motto, ‘Develop the child; develop the nation.’

Despite their contradictions with local culture, international children’s rights discourses have been so prolific in Uganda that even children – often more so than their parents and guardians – place emphasis
on attaining their rights as essential to full citizenship. Further, Ugandan children’s examples doubtless illustrate the experiences of children throughout developing countries. This article will therefore map this powerful influence in Uganda, how it has affected local discourses of childhood and national development, as well as the lived experiences of children themselves.

The International Influence of Children’s Rights: The View from UNICEF

Many of the current notions of children’s rights circulating most publicly in Uganda filter through UNICEF. The organization has had a long history of promoting consideration of children as an integral part of national development schemes throughout Africa and the developing world, offering assistance to those governments willing to consider children as major factors in human resource development for poverty eradication. However, Maggie Black contextualizes this by stating that “At a strategic level, the new enthusiasm for ‘aid’ was a reaction to the arrival of many newly independent countries - especially in Africa - onto the world stage and fear in the West of their assimilation into the Soviet camp” (Black 1996: 9-10). At the UNICEF office in Kampala, a large plaque with the organization’s mission statement hangs on the wall. One UNICEF goal is “to establish children’s rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards of behavior towards children.”¹ It continues, “UNICEF insists that the survival, protection and development of children are universal development imperatives that are integral to human progress.” This explained much of what I had been hearing and seeing in the media pertaining to children around Uganda.

In the context of international development goals, UNICEF has been very successful in Uganda at mobilizing political will on behalf of children (Fig. 1). To turn rhetoric into action, UNICEF launched the 2000 Global Movement for Children campaign to raise awareness and hold nations accountable to the pledges they had made to protect children when they signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The campaign asked people to pledge their ideological commitment. Even the President and First Lady had signed cards, which were prominently displayed in the UNICEF building’s front lobby. Their

pledges conveyed clear links between putting children first and rapidly developing the country, in line with the UNICEF mission statement. Their concerns were not surprisingly particular to NRM policy in Uganda.

**Figure 1:** A children’s rights billboard in Kampala.

Despite the Global Movement for Children’s solicitation of pledges, the local UNICEF office carefully separates its mission from those of the Ugandan people and government to avoid accusations of cultural imperialism. To understand how and why UNICEF operated this way, I talked to Mads Oyen, the UNICEF external relations officer, about UNICEF’s role in Uganda and how it was shaping concepts of childhood. As a key representative of the organization, Oyen provided a clearer picture of UNICEF Uganda’s operating philosophies and perceived obstacles.

A lanky, young Scandinavian man, Oyen led me to his office with a partial view of town past the lush tropical vegetation swaying in the breeze. I asked him how UNICEF views childhood in their mandate. He said unapologetically, “The CRC is absolutely a universal model of childhood, deriving from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. UNICEF is the government partner in implementing the CRC, to
which Uganda is a signatory.” UNICEF supports the government in that effort, using technical advice and funding to help create internal programs at the district level.

Oyen explained that UNICEF operates within Uganda more and more from a CRC perspective, rather than dealing with cultural specificities, in order to diversify its response to children’s needs. For that reason, UNICEF reformulated its approach in the 1960s from charity-based to rights-based work (Black 1996: 155). Oyen reasoned that this approach, which claims that children’s rights are primary rather than secondary to other development concerns, is better for achieving certain victories over structural violence in society. “Rather than get into debates about cultural relativity with people,” he said, “I just point out that I’m only helping enforce what their government committed themselves to.”

UNICEF remains righteous in their mission to promote universal ideals, and they are pleased by the Ugandan government’s compliance. “The Uganda government [has] one of the most progressive constitutions in Africa,” Oyen pointed out. “The problem is not on that level; the problem is, ‘Does it filter through?’ And my answer is yes it does, but it takes time to reach everywhere…” He cited daily violations of children’s rights that happen right outside the window, such as corporal punishment in schools and the existence of street children. “The main problem is poverty, but there is also attitude. The primary duty there is not UNICEF’s; it is not the government’s; it is the parents…That has to filter through to the general population and there has to be a change of attitude.

“The Constitution is in compliance with all the Conventions,” he continued, “but the law system is not. Uganda’s laws are a mess!” He believed that Parliament was not passing and changing the right laws, nor do the police enforce or follow the law. Oyen cited the example of child delinquents being arrested; children are not supposed to be put in prison, “but people want that: the popular concept that if you have a problem with children, you put them in prison when they are young and that will teach them a lesson. But that is illegal. If that is the intention, you should not use remand as intentional punishment…” Yet it is regularly used for that purpose in Ugandan police stations. “The Constitution does not evolve from that [local] moral framework.”
The Constitutional Assembly was comprised of an educated elite, many of whom came out of exile to write it. So though it was supposedly made ‘by the people, for the people,’ the moral framework of the majority of Ugandans is not necessarily reflected in it, and in fact, some would be outraged to know some of its provisions that go against traditional cultural norms such as settlement of disputes by patriarchal privilege. “The duties and obligations are clear,” insisted Oyen. “How exactly that will be achieved – how those rights will be realized – is not clear at the moment.” The social factors responsible for failure to implement children’s rights are numerous and daunting, but as long as UNICEF continues to operate on the assumption that declarations meant to protect children’s interests are universally applicable, they eschew local economic and social realities in favor of hegemonic ideology. Where international actions have not been culturally sensitive and aware of factors that adversely affect children’s welfare, they have failed in their ultimate goal. For instance, western social programs build in family models based on an estimated two children, though in East Africa, the ideal family size is about four, and actual family size reaches eight or more (Kilbride 2000: 147). When this model is applied to African development schemes, it leads to a perpetual shortfall of development goals and only increases personal poverty and national indebtedness.

**A Commitment to Rights for International Legitimacy**

If the average Ugandan is slow to embrace international children’s rights principles, the President and the Constitutional Assembly have demonstrated their definitive commitment to them. UNICEF Uganda writes, “In the Convention on the Rights of the Child we have the framework against which we can assess legislation, policies and resource allocations to ensure they are child-friendly” (Evans 2001: 63). Oyen claims that one of the motivations for such support is raising Uganda’s image as a “normal country” among other progressive nations. His theory is backed by Alex de Waal, who recognizes this trend throughout Africa. “African states rushed to sign and ratify the CRC – Ghana was the first country in the world to do so, and more than half of the early signatories were African – but it took more than ten years for just fifteen African states to accede to the African Charter, even though its provisions are little
different” (de Waal and Argenti 2002: 4). de Waal suggests that perhaps African governments, more concerned with their global than continental reputations, may have signed the CRC largely as a symbolic aspiration for status or access to funds, and not with the express intention to deliver on their commitments. Uganda, however, seems to be an atypical case, in which government is genuinely trying to address the ways in which rights are intertwined with goals and strategies synonymous with national development aims and indicators – education and health care, for example (de Waal and Argenti 2002: 5).

Identifying childhood as a crucial moment for participation in Uganda’s national development did not come automatically to Museveni’s government. Indeed, Museveni has recently written,

> The government of Uganda has been influenced by the language of the Global Movement, with the new emphasis on the basic rights of all children rather than their needs… Investing in our children today provides us with a practical way of addressing some of the core concerns and problems of our times. Children's rights must be seen as being the cutting edge of human rights. Ensuring they are respected would do more to solve society's long-term problems and to prevent crises and conflicts arising than anything else we could possibly try to do (Evans 2001: 8).

That belief is now firmly ensconced in various state apparatuses as well as in state ideology. It started early in Museveni’s administration with the Ugandan National Plan of Action for Children (UNPAC) to identify the needs of young people. Its greatest achievement to date has been the drafting and promulgation of the 1996 Children's Statute, “the essential legal framework for dealing with the concerns and rights of children” (Evans 2001: 12). The Children’s Statute serves to clarify the duties and obligations of the state to children, which include providing support to children in armed conflict, the implementation of Universal Primary Education, and – perhaps the most difficult to enforce effectively – paying greater attention to children’s voices.

**Local Concepts of Childhood**

UNICEF’s ten-year Uganda program report writes of The 1996 Children’s Statute, “Districts were responsible for translating the national goals that were in turn derived from the global goals” (Evans 2001: 12), suggesting a neat translation. They started by taking a census to get accurate breakdowns of
age, including “youths aged 14 to 18 who had not previously been thought of as children” (Evans 2001: 21).

The sudden shift in designations of who children are signifies international influence; the CRC declares that children are any people under the age of eighteen. While these discrepancies point to the arbitrariness of legal categorizations of young people, they are also much more rigid than local definitions of children. Ugandans continue to reject legal definitions of children because of social factors that make the definition locally situational, such as labor and marriage. For example, “girls would usually be married shortly after achieving sexual maturity, and consolidate that adult status when they became mothers, while boys would achieve ‘adult’ status by degrees, through initiation, eligibility to fight, marriage, acquisition of land, and elevation to the position of elder” (de Waal and Argenti 2002: 14). In Uganda, the status of a person typically increases gradually with age and varies according to achievement of certain milestones, including having children oneself; hence a set age of majority is both arbitrary and rigid in comparison.

The language of achievement is instructive here: in Africa, the social status of adults is achieved, much more so than in western culture, where the age of majority is reinforced by law. When the Women’s Commission on Refugee Women and Children interviewed children in northern Uganda about their own definitions of these categories, their ambivalence was recognizant of both legal definitions and cultural observances of age-based identity; they told WCRWC that adolescents were people aged 10-18, but that girls become women once they start to menstruate or get married. ‘Youth’ they considered to be people aged 15-30, the main difference from adolescents being that they are sexually active. For these children, the most striking distinction between child and adult had not to do with turning eighteen, but with getting married. Marriage (and having children) makes an adult. Yet many people in their area were getting married younger, especially girls in camps for internally displaced persons, who were often forced to

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2 The use of the word ‘youth’ is both highly persistent and problematic in Africa. ‘Youth’ is often deployed politically, especially in situations of armed conflict. In these discourses, youth are both the instigators and the victims of political violence. Further, it is usually codified as ‘male,’ marginalizing young females from public debate, often to their detriment when it comes to youth assistance programs (de Waal, A., and N. Argenti. Editors. 2002. Young Africa: Realising the Rights of Children and Youth. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc.).
marry soldiers and others with resources to both unburden and bring wealth to their own resource-strapped families. Under international scrutiny, traditional notions of social responsibility become antithetical to children’s rights, while at the same time, austere economic conditions necessitate ‘adult’ responsibility from children, such as their participation in commercial activity for the survival of the household. Post-colonial economic decline only entrenches persistent African cultural notions that children are essential family resources, not individuals endowed with rights and freedoms independent of family and community. Because of these local factors, there is pressure to lower the age of majority to sixteen (Uganda Child Rights NGO Network 1997: 5).

Further, many Ugandans believe that UNICEF interprets higher responsibility for children negatively: children cannot be children when they are caretakers, cattle tenders, or water carriers, particularly if these activities are seen to interfere with education, health, or mental development.³ Yet these tasks can serve as mechanisms by which children learn to be nurturant-responsible towards their communities, a hallmark of achieved personhood in African societies (Whiting and Whiting 1975: 103). Contrary to western opinions, the introduction of children’s rights and laws promulgated in ‘the best interest of the child’ threaten “the survival of the old safeguards intended to prevent the abuse of children” in local cultures (Rwezaura 1998: 253). For example, the Kilbrides’ research has shown that in Kenya, discouragement of polygyny has actually lessened children’s overall welfare. Polygyny has not gone away; it has only become informalized and clandestine in response to religious sanction and ‘modern’ law. Adultery relieves fathers of responsibilities toward their children, overburdening mothers while still limiting their means of income through gendered labor discrimination (Kilbride 2000: 147). Reinstatement of traditionally-sanctioned but socially-reinvented polygyny might therefore better serve children’s needs, but it counters hegemonic global gender sensitivities.

³ Article 32 of the CRC states that children have the right “to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health, or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.” http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/Global_2000_Evaluation_of_the_Capacity.pdf (2004).
Navigating the Cultural Contradictions

On a macro-structural level, developing countries like Uganda are commonly infantilized by policies of international assistance. Reputation is not the least of things at stake; monetary assistance rides on a government’s ability to jump through the ideological hoops set out by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, various United Nations organizations, and donor countries – hoops set out in those countries’ ‘best interest’. This trend has been well-documented in development literature (Cooper 1997, Fairhead 2000, Ferguson 1994, Long and Arce 2000, Pigg 1992). However, its actual effect on children’s lives has not been adequately scrutinized by policymakers and influential international organizations like UNICEF (Boyden 1997, Kilbride 2000).

Local activists are working to reconcile children’s rights ideology with practice by educating children and the public at large, but this lack of compatibility creates a structural vulnerability where an inherent one is presumed. As Lansdown puts it, “there is a tendency to rely too heavily on a presumption of children's biological and psychological vulnerability in developing our law, policy and practice, and insufficient focus on the extent which their lack of civil status creates that vulnerability” (Lansdown 1999: 35). While a stronger children’s rights discourse may prevent adults from falling back on culture to justify acts of abuse or neglect, the ways in which law portrays children as developmentally unable to protect themselves puts the power of protection in the hands of the very people from which the law states children need protection: adults.

Cultural conflicts around rights talk are nothing new: during the drafting of the CRC, members of many developing nations complained that the definition of ‘child' was narrowly delineated according to western standards that did not aptly categorize children in their own countries. Many developing countries did not even participate in drafting the CRC because of the dominance of western values in determining normative childhood. This was also in part because state intervention is seen as threatening to family sovereignty (Boyden 1997: 204). Traditional family customs that involved children, such as communal harvesting, became a potential violation of children's rights under the drafted UN charter (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987). In response, the Organization for African Unity (OAU) adopted its own African Charter
on the Rights and Welfare of the Children to reflect African values in its construction of children’s rights and obligations to society. The OAU’s charter emphasizes responsibility and community belonging.

Many nongovernmental organizations in Uganda reinforce and perpetuate UNICEF’s convictions that raising the status of children in society will raise national development levels more generally. On the streets of Kampala, ‘development speak’ is ubiquitous. In the process, the figure of the child becomes central to national development rhetoric. This notion is not so difficult to interpellate with local knowledge. Hansen and Twaddle point out, “From the local point of view... development is a continuous and creative interaction between the universalist, the individualist, and the familial. e.g. developing a family through having children” (Hansen and Twaddle 1998: 232). Further, persons and families are interpellated by group identity. The Kilbrides explain,

The collectivity: family, clan, lineage, or ethnic group, takes precedence over the individual. The ideal typical person is one who is firmly rooted in the group with a commensurate orientation to social responsibilities. The parent, therefore, literally has children for the social group. Children are raised as social persons who will be properly oriented to the group, its ancestors, and the needs of their own parents (Kilbride and Kilbride 1990: 84-85).

This cultural fact makes children ideal stewards of development. But the ways in which this is accomplished also follow strict moral codes. This is exemplified by the local concept of mpisa, explained at length by Philip and Janet Kilbride:

\[ \text{M} \text{p} \text{i} \text{s} \text{a} \ [\text{custom, habit, conduct}] \text{ includes such things as being obedient to authority figures; not interfering in adult conversation; not eating while walking on the road; greeting people properly; and many other social expectations. The content of } \text{m} \text{p} \text{i} \text{s} \text{a} \text{ constitutes a code of social etiquette on how to relate to other people. Specifically, having } \text{m} \text{p} \text{i} \text{s} \text{a} \text{ requires one to become socially involved with others in the proper way (Kilbride and Kilbride 1990: 89).} \]

In some ways, mpisa is effectively co-opted by development messages as a cultural device through which to encourage development. Yet the same philosophy also poses a crucial paradox when brought into conversation with international development discourse, which is largely based on the foundation of individual rights. Susan Reynolds and Michael A. Whyte argue, “In one sense individual achievement is consonant with family growth and prosperity. In another sense, the amity of kinship, or the ‘economy of affection,’ is antithetical to individual achievement” (Reynolds and Whyte 1998: 237). For example,
whenever young people find gainful employment, they are expected to help members of both their nuclear and extended families financially, to an extent that they themselves are often broke. This can be seen as one way of both mediating and perpetuating the contradictions between individual and communal obligation.

There is also the issue of age-based authority: when children’s rights are expounded by the state, they often meet resistance from older generations fearful of having elder authority overturned. Over a bowl of steaming *matooke* at her home one day, the grandmother of a child I had been working with told me how she felt that children’s rights were destructive to adult-child relations generally. Her children, demonstrating *mpisa*, all sat quietly eavesdropping in the other room and did not interrupt. “The freedoms that children have nowadays aren’t good because the children are becoming just like adults,” she complained. She said that teachers are partly to blame because they have become timid about disciplining children in schools, fearing that police will intervene.4 “My neighbors appreciate the fact that I am raising my children strictly,” she boasted. “Other children are always running around doing immoral things like going to discos.”

**Translation: A Key Cultural Issue**

Part of the local negative interpretation of children’s rights can be explained as a literal problem of translation. The development industry’s formalized language lacks the situated knowledge that would make it semantically meaningful when grounded in diverse local contexts of daily life (Arce 2000: 44). In the absence of an internal development language, local people work to fill terms like ‘rights’ with their own productive, locally applicable content and meaning. When I visited the Uganda Child Rights NGO Network (UCRNN) office one rainy day in a bustling Kampala suburb, I found them struggling with this issue. “Most local languages do not have a word that means ‘rights,’” Virginia Ochwo, a senior trainer, pointed out. “In Luganda, the closest word that we use is *ddembe*, and this means something like, ‘You are free to do what you want.’ So when you go to parents and you tell them that their children have

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4 I have never heard of this happening, however.
“ddembe, they are not pleased,” Ochwo said with a typical Ugandan propensity for understatement. If not explained carefully, the idea of children having ddembe makes parents and elders resentful of what they come to see as foreign impositions that overturn traditional social hierarchy in destructive ways: when children have ddembe, they start to disobey their elders, and the social order of mpisa breaks down.

One solution is to balance children’s rights with their responsibilities. UCRNN produces posters with two columns: one that lists children’s rights such as education and another that lists their corresponding obligations, “to respect and obey your parents and teachers,” for example (Fig. 2). This format was commonly replicated on homemade posters in Ugandan classrooms.

The particular distinction between children’s and other human rights is that they are more narrowly defined as obligations and prohibitions, both for parents and children. Children’s freedom of
choice is usurped by an adult conception of ‘best interest’ (Archard 1993). Laws passed to protect children can often therefore serve to further entrench discrimination and the denial of rights like those accorded adults to children (Franklin 1986: 3). There are also specific ways in which the notion of adembe, when applied to children in national development contexts, exacerbates social inequities – a fact not lost on NGOs attempting to help children independently of their families. I discussed the ironies of children’s rights debates one day with Geoffrey Denye of the international NGO World Vision. “The issue of child labor is a contentious one,” he said. “Is it helping or hurting a child who, for example, is an orphan and needs to support himself but who supposedly isn’t supposed to work? Sometimes the will of children is set against their rights.”

**Sensitization: A Positive Step?**

Local NGOs and civil society are working on various strategies to mediate these contradictions, but their main strategy is ‘sensitization.’ This word is commonly used in development programs, especially those targeting attitudinal and behavioral change. The premise is that local people are not aware of the benefits of progressive approaches to local issues. If they are only ‘sensitized’ to the need for something and its benefits, then they will follow better practices and reap the rewards. For example, if parents are sensitized to the benefits of children’s education, they will be willing to invest in it. Again, a type of paternalism prevails in discourses of sensitization that often overlook local realities in favor of ideology. The reason that children are not in school usually has more to do with the parent or guardians’ lack of capital resources than with a negative attitude toward schooling, but stereotypes of poor people’s ignorance and apathy prevail.

Even where successful at raising awareness of children’s rights, NGO programs espousing children’s rights may have unintended negative outcomes for particularly vulnerable children in their families and communities as well. I once sat in on a children’s rights lesson given at the World Vision Gulu Children of War Rehabilitation Center for children who had been abducted and then had escaped from the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army. The counselor, Charles, started out saying that rural children aren’t taught
“things they should know as kids,” whether the parents are aware of them or not. Charles urged them to know their rights and to take them home to teach others. They will be the “future pillars of this nation,” he reminded them, “so it is imperative.”

Charles started by saying that parents cannot abuse their freedoms. A second counselor suggested that parents sometimes mistreat children because of frustration over the poverty and insecurity they were facing on a daily basis. “So who has been abused at home?” he asked them to confess.

None responded until they were prodded gently. Then an older boy stood, and before he could start, they told him resolutely, “You are a victim.” Other hands shot up, as if the label somehow appealed to them. The children who gave testimony usually cried as they aired their grievances – a very rare occurrence, as it was typically discouraged in local Acholi culture.

While this type of exercise both educated children and sanctioned their expression of suffering, it also had the potential to add to the strain of intergenerational relationships and daily realities. Counselors had already mentioned to me how the war in the north is straining the family structure, so what would this do to it, I wondered, and had World Vision had far-reaching discussions about the consequences? Counselors seemed to warn children most against their own families, and it made me wonder what would happen if the children were to try to espouse their rights at home. Under the circumstances, it seemed it could do more harm than good. Like other types of international aid and assistance, psychosocial support potentially worsens the crisis it purports to relieve. At the same time, the proliferation of children’s rights discourse in light of daily poverty makes ‘sensitized’ parents feel like failures. Many Ugandan parents were well aware of the problems their children faced and were sympathetic to them, but they were often in a position where they could do little to better the situation. One parent told me,

These children of mine sometimes they don’t perform well [in school]. But when you realize the condition they pass through, they walk a lonely path. Sometimes they have not taken tea with milk for two days; they have taken dry tea [tea made with water as opposed to milk]... [My daughter] tells me she is feeling pain, stomach pain somehow, because we have not taken food yet... Now when she does a test and she gets lower marks, sometimes the father tries to say, ‘Why have you performed very badly?’ But I say we should not only do that but we should know other conditions which contribute to this child’s performance. Maybe there are factors which we don’t see. Because there are so many things: physically your body may be weak or sick...
This mother knew that sometimes she failed to properly provide for her children when it came to things like medicine or nutritious food, and that these deficiencies can contribute to children’s ability to achieve. “But it doesn’t help that in Africa,” she said, “children are not supposed to complain of lack of energy or illness. You must use your powers to force him to work... since we always need free labor from children and you have authority over them, you don’t want hear that the [child] is sick, so we force and sometimes you find that it is... deteriorating their day-to-day life, or whatever they do.”

If parents saw the difficulties of implementing children’s rights in their daily lives, so certainly did the children. They were most often direct targets of rights talk, despite their limited ability to enforce or defend them. Rather than freeing children, normative discourses of childhood based on international rights were often used to constrain children by suggesting to them how they should be, what they should have, and how they should behave. When Police Inspector Nakhanda visited the Kampala school where I did fieldwork to talk to students about rights and safety, all the children filed into the main hall and sat closely together on the floor. The inspector’s introduction was interrupted by the arrivals of two different television camera crews. This excited the students, and the teacher paused from her introduction to remind the children that since they would be filmed, they should act ‘naturally’: “Smile and laugh when necessary but do not laugh for too long.” To me, this was a command to literally act like children. She then went back to introducing the inspector, who also hosts an education television show. “She wants to see children grow to be important people in the country,” the teacher explained.

Inspector Nakhanda first allowed the choir to lead the school in the national anthem and the school anthem as well a song and dance about children’s rights that the choir director had composed:

The Ugandan child and the children all
Are precious things we must protect
Let us all join our hands
Together their rights we must defend!

The inspector started by pointing out that she is also a parent of three and therefore has to give discipline, love and care to her children. Her agenda for the talk focused on children’s rights but also
included safety information on bombs, traffic, and abduction – all perceived threats to local children’s lives.

After talking at length about how to identify bombs for the sake of avoiding them, Nakhanda asked children to list some children’s rights they knew about. She called on children who said things like education, security, medical care, basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing, the right to live with parents, and protection from violence. This last one she responded to by saying that girls especially should not tolerate anyone touching them. They had to protect themselves from men when they tried to approach them sexually. She warned against teenage pregnancies and sugar daddies. “Boys telling you now that they will marry you are lying. They will not marry you. They will make you pregnant; they are only giving you AIDS.” She gave girls the specific example of teachers going after students, which was apparently quite common, even at the primary school level. The late Dr. Kasalina Matovu of Makerere University, founder of the Minds Across Africa School Clubs program, told me that when giving children opportunities to express themselves, girls commonly confessed that male teachers had made sexual advances toward them. “It seems to be even more common in sixth grade than in seventh grade, perhaps because most girls are just developing womanly features at that time,” she suspected. Inspector Nakhanda said they should report it to another teacher or headmaster or parents. Children might complain that a teacher does not give them good marks because the student has refused the teacher. “That teacher of yours who is disturbing you here now is not going to be the one who is marking you in UNEB,” the Uganda National Examination Board that administers the school leaving exams. “Leave men alone until you go to university,” she implored them. “Then you can find a husband. Now, you are too young. We don’t expect you to be mothers,” she said. “And you the boys, we don’t expect you to be fathers.”

Inspector Nakhanda’s attention to girls’ problems in particular indicates the extent to which Ugandans are becoming sensitive to the problems of ‘the girl child’ – a positive outcome of international development discourse. Uganda has a Ministry of State for Gender and Cultural Affairs as well as a Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development to redress issues of gender discrimination. However, this attention to girl children’s issues often comes with contradictory statements about how
girls are culpable in others’ behavior toward them. After warning girls of men’s foul intents, the inspector recited a long checklist of things girls and women should do to repel sexual abuse: “no overdrinking, no moving at odd hours, no sexy dressing or provocative walking (which she mimicked to the children’s delight), no going to bars, receiving gifts from any man, accepting lifts, or lying, i.e. no means no and yes means yes.” A teacher even took over the microphone to reiterate the main point: “We have children; we don’t have women.” However, she gave no specific advice to boys regarding avoiding assault – or becoming assailters, for that matter.

To return to the point of children’s responsibilities more generally, and to tie children’s rights to mpisa, Inspector Nakhanda then talked about honoring parents “to live longer on earth.” Quoting the Bible, she said, “Your mother and father are the what? The God you have on earth. You hear that?”

“Yes,” the children replied. She asked them to repeat her loudly and often. “We want a God fearing country,” she said. “So children must respect their parents.”

She pointed out that children should not be subjected to hard labor or other abuse by adults such as step-parents. If they are being abused, children should go to the police to report those who violate their rights. They have to behave, though. If the children go for videos instead of going to school, the police will punish them instead of the parents.

The inspector ended with advice for academic success: “We want you to get smart friends,” she said. “Those smart kids can help you. If you hang out with truants, you will be no good. Those ones want to become useless to the nation.” In fact, she said, those people should be reported to the police. “I want children to respect adults, not to live in fear. We want you to develop to be the what? The future of Uganda. You are the flowers of Uganda. You are the what?”

“The flowers of Uganda,” the children repeated.

“The nation’s flowers of Uganda are now growing.”
Children’s Agency and the Reception of Rights Messages

Assemblies like Inspector Nakanda’s point to the ways that local authorities are trying to reconcile the principles of *mpisa* with international children’s rights discourses not only for the sake of the family, clan, or ethnic group, but also for the betterment of the nation. This sensitization can create a sense of hope, but more often it creates anxiety, especially amongst children: when the media increasingly covers the most shocking cases of abuse and neglect, children as a population become more sensitive to their own vulnerability. While children around the country are educated about their rights, they are also realizing that they are suffering from rights abuses. Their marginalization from normative global childhood creates the stigmatizing trope of the African Child. This is the child whose gaunt, fly-covered face acts as the international symbol of misery and preventable human tragedy (Ennew and Milne 1990: 9). This child, usually severely malnourished and diseased, stripped of agency and personality, acts as the poster child leading the cry for international assistance.

This image has become so prevalent that African children themselves buy into it. At an affluent Kampala private school, children put on a variety show in which at least three different classes, from first grade to sixth grade, took up this trope. One class of first-grade children with white gloves and dazed faces recited a poem entitled The African Child:

*The African Child, the African Child*
*We are the children of this continent.*
*We are the children of this nation.*
*Why should we be mistreated,*
*As if we are born from another land?*
*Stop mistreating us!*
*We are human beings, the leaders of tomorrow.*
*As [babies], some of us are thrown in pit latrines and dust bins.*
*During growth, some of us are insulted and mistreated.*
*Not enough [food] is given to us.*
*They slaughter us as animal sacrifice.*
*Do not forget us, teachers of this nation!*
*Do not forget us, government of Uganda!*
*Enough is enough!*
*Stop child abuse!*

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5 A reference to a recent spate of abandoned babies left in refuse locations that was eliciting a public outcry.
The students recited this poem complete with hand gestures of hunger and slit throats. The angry tone in which they spoke was startling and powerful, especially considering the children’s tender ages. As this poem solidifies a common child identity that demands recognition of their rights, it reminds parents in the audience that the state of some children in the nation is indeed abysmal and deserves action and protection, in accordance with the CRC. This is not possible without somehow categorizing children as embattled and marginalized.

Another class sang a song of the same name that lamented, “Little children suffering, little children crying…” These particular children were all well-fed, well-schooled, and did not fit the stereotype they were promoting. Yet their performances simultaneously condemned and reproduced the image of the singular African child who is impoverished, dejected, and robbed of her potential, even as they drew attention to her plight.

Where children do have legitimate claims of rights abuse, they feel they have little or no recourse. Sumayiya, an 11-year-old informant, often told me about instances of her peers being abused, physically or sexually, by relatives or adult strangers. Sumayiya said she worried about such things happening to her, too. She tried to protect herself, but she expressed some skepticism about her own and others’ abilities to do that. She told other children about her problems, but she did not tell many adults because she felt that they would not help. “Kids don’t feel like even teachers or local council members are very helpful,” Sumayiya said. Despite – and perhaps because of – her heightened awareness of her rights, she felt powerless. “Even if you tell someone, he will not help you at school,” she said. “Maybe he will talk over you. So the best thing to do is to keep quiet, about each and every thing.” Despite all the rhetoric about children’s rights, children themselves see what little intervention there is on their behalf as feeble at best. Ennew argues that such a position is indeed the direct result of the inherent paradox of children’s rights discourse (Ennew and Milne 1990).
Sumayiya and her friends repeatedly showed me it was common for children to feel powerless (Fig. 3). They were well aware of the gulf between the children’s rights ideals they were being taught and the reality for most children. For all their knowledge, children lacked the power and resources to put rights into motion. “Adults just have more power,” Sumayiya sighed. For all their knowledge of their rights, children remained disempowered and did not have much hope for change in the immediate future. However, their increasing awareness of children’s rights enabled them to believe they could battle injustices towards children of the next generation: “When I am a lawyer,” Sumayiya told me resolutely, “I want to make laws to protect children.”

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