

***ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES***

**The Heart of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Future We Want for All**

*Global Thematic Consultation*

**WHAT DOES 'EQUALITY' MEAN FOR CHILDREN  
IN RELATION TO ADULTS?**

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October 2012

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## Abstract

This paper asks how the idea of 'equality' between children and adults can be made a reality in the post 2015 development agenda. 'Non-discrimination' is a fundamental principle of children's rights discourse, but is invariably thought of in terms of equality *among* children, not as equality between children and adults, while discrimination by adults against children is an accepted social norm. Also there is no equivalence in the responsibilities placed on children and adults. Adults are required to protect and care for children; children are in most societies expected to respect and honour adults, which makes for unequal power relationships. The view of children as incapable continues to be used to deny them equal rights, though the concept of 'the evolving capacities of the child' offers a more pragmatic solution. Considering these issues, how can the concept of 'equality' be meaningfully applied to relationships between children and adults? One response is found in the 'children's liberation' literature, which calls for organised resistance to children's oppression. However the issues are resistant to such an approach, and child liberation offers only a partial solution. An alternative approach is to recognise and tackle 'adultism', here defined as, "the belief that the adult human being is intrinsically superior to or of greater worth than the child, and the child, by default, inferior or of lesser worth". Challenging adultism enables us to reconceptualise the underlying equality in child-adult relations, which includes equality as rights-holders, equality as ends rather than means and equality of human dignity.

## The author

Born in Ireland in 1954, Harry Shier lived and worked in England for 25 years, initially on adventure playgrounds. In 1988 he founded Playtrain, an independent training agency specializing in children's rights, play and creativity. In the 1990s he worked on children's rights and participation, developing the "Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme", which enables children to act as expert consultants to the management of cultural institutions. This experience was crystallized in his influential 2001 paper "Pathways to Participation". In 2001 he moved to Nicaragua, Central America, to work with local organization CESESMA, supporting child workers on the region's coffee plantations in defending their rights. He also works internationally as a trainer, writer and researcher.

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## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the team from CESESMA in San Ramón, Nicaragua, whose commitment to the practice of children and young people's empowerment inspired this paper, and Professor Laura Lundy of Queen's University Belfast, whose critique of an earlier draft helped bring it to completion.

## What does ‘equality’ mean for children in relation to adults?

### **Introduction: The context of the global debate on inequalities**

As the 2015 target date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals approaches, UN agencies and others have proposed a global debate to shape a new framework and agenda for international development. Within this broad international debate, one of the core themes is ‘Inequalities’. Addressing inequalities is seen as both a moral imperative from a human-rights perspective, and also critical for robust, inclusive and sustainable growth. In 2012, a consortium of UN agencies therefore launched a global thematic consultation on “addressing inequalities in the post-2015 agenda”, whose objective is to stimulate wide-ranging global discussion on the various forms of inequalities and present findings to key decision-makers and world leaders.

As a contribution to this global discussion, this paper asks how are we to understand the idea of “equality” between children and adults. What is ‘generational equality’ for children in theory, and how can it be made a reality in the post 2015 global development agenda?

### **The non-discrimination principle**

When considering the issue of equality between children and adults, there are a number of issues that have major implications, yet do not arise, or are conceived differently, in relation to other manifestations of (in)equality such as gender or ethnicity.

‘Non-discrimination’ is a fundamental principle of children’s rights discourse, expressed in Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

“States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.”

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has declared this to be one of the four fundamental principles underpinning the Convention<sup>1</sup>, and it is widely accepted as such. Whilst the wording refers explicitly to the avoidance of discrimination, this can also be understood as a requirement to guarantee equal treatment to all.

It is, however important to notice that the long list of factors which must not be the basis of discrimination: “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth”, does not include age. Discrimination on grounds of age is not specifically mentioned as one of the types of discrimination to be avoided by States

Parties. The list however ends with the words, “or other status”. Should we understand that the age of a child is included here under the umbrella of ‘other status’ as an area where states must not discriminate?

In general, when the non-discrimination principle is discussed this is in terms of equality *among* children, not as equality between children and adults. The principle is thus understood as telling us that all children must be treated as equal to one another, but not necessarily that children and adults must be treated as equals.

The contrast with general understandings of non-discrimination in relation to race or gender is very clear. When we talk of gender equality or preventing gender-based discrimination, we are not simply saying that all women must be treated as equals, but specifically that men and women must have equal status. This type of understanding is far from clear in the case of children and adults.

Indeed, discrimination by adults against children is an accepted social norm. There are laws in all countries that stop children doing things that adults are free to do: seeking employment, driving cars, standing for president, voting in elections etc. The specific things children are prohibited from doing and the age limits applied vary from country to country, but the principle holds true everywhere. In certain circumstances the differential treatment of a particular social group may be in accordance with that group’s best interests and may therefore be justifiable, in which case it does not necessarily constitute discrimination. However, Claire Breen has shown that in many cases the differential treatment of children does not meet accepted criteria for justifiability or ‘best interests’, and therefore cannot be seen as anything other than age discrimination; that is discrimination against children *because they are children*.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of voting age is an important example of this kind of discrimination. In most countries the right to vote in elections is established as the preeminent way for citizens to have a say in, and influence, the governance of their country; yet this is a right almost universally denied to children and adolescents, simply on grounds of age (in a handful of countries, including Nicaragua, Brazil, Ecuador and Austria, adolescents of 16 and 17 can vote in elections, but these are the exceptions to the rule). Older adolescents are nevertheless permitted to contribute to their nation in other ways: to work and pay taxes, to join the armed forces and die in battle, to marry and start a family: and of course they can be tried and punished for breaking the laws that they had no say in creating.

### **Adults’ responsibilities and children’s duties**

Relationships between children and adults cannot be entirely reciprocal in terms of rights and responsibilities. For example, it is generally understood to be the responsibility of adults to protect or “safeguard” children, but children have no equivalent responsibility to safeguard

adults. Article 5 of the UN Convention states that parents and guardians are expected to provide “appropriate direction and guidance” to the child in the exercise of his or her rights, and again this is clearly a one-way street with no equivalent expectation placed on children.

As an international treaty between sovereign governments, it would be beyond the remit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to speak of children’s duties or responsibilities, and it makes no attempt to do so. However, many national and regional codes and conventions do establish children’s duties. For example, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child states that:

“The child, subject to his age and ability, and such limitations as may be contained in the present Charter, shall have the duty...to work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and to assist them in case of need.”<sup>3</sup>

The contentious suggestion here that communities contain superior, and by implication inferior, people we will need to return to later. To take a Latin American example, the Nicaraguan Children and Adolescents Legal Code states that:

“The following are duties and responsibilities of children and adolescents, according to their age and provided that these do not damage their rights, liberties, guarantees or dignity or contravene the law: (a) to obey, respect and express affection towards their mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers or guardians”.<sup>4</sup>

Further sub-clauses of the same article list many more such duties including helping with the housework, studying hard, respecting teachers and school officials, respecting the beliefs and ideas of elders and respecting national heroes.

These ideas are backed by scriptural authority in many religions. In Christianity for example, the fifth commandment requires children to honour their parents, and other religions have similar injunctions of one form or another. Whilst these are ancient ideas, built into the spiritual roots of many societies and so having a profound influence on cultural values and beliefs about child-rearing; the counterpart, the idea that there is a corresponding requirement for parents to respect their children, is by contrast a novelty, no older than the UN Convention itself.

In short; in law, in culture and in tradition, adults have power over their children and children are comparatively powerless in the relationship. Where a relationship is characterised by such significant differences in duties, responsibilities and above all power, in what meaningful sense can we talk about equality between the parties?

## Leaving childhood behind

An important feature that is specific to the case of children as a discriminated-against or disempowered – many would say oppressed – group is that all children will eventually relinquish membership of this group as they leave childhood behind and become adults. On their eighteenth birthday (using the UNCRC definition of a child) they leave the oppressed group they have till now belonged to and are admitted to the oppressor group. In most of the other forms of oppression or discrimination mentioned in Article 2 as seen above – race, colour, ethnic origin, sex, disability etc. – this simply doesn't happen (or is a rare and exceptional occurrence). In other instances it does sometimes happen; a child from a poor family may become wealthy, a child born into a discriminated-against religious group can change his or her religion, but these are still exceptions to the general rule; whereas in the case of switching from the child group to the adult group it is universal and inevitable (this is not to deny that some adults may continue to be treated *as if they were children*, for example those with learning disabilities, but the UNCRC is clear that what defines a person as a child is not how they are treated but is purely a question of age).

Whilst they leave their childhood behind, young people may thus retain membership of other oppressed or discriminated-against groups, probably for the rest of their lives. Girls stop being children but they do not stop being women; disabled children become disabled adults etc. This has led some writers to suggest that the best way for children to overcome the oppression they face as children is simply to wait till they get older. Onora O'Neill for example puts it bluntly, suggesting that in comparison with other oppressed groups, "Children are more fundamentally but less permanently powerless; their main remedy is to grow up"<sup>5</sup>. Whilst this appears to fly in the face of a human-rights-based perspective, O'Neill, who was writing just before the promulgation of the UNCRC, took the view that "the rhetoric of rights can rarely empower children"<sup>6</sup> and believed that a focus on the *obligations of adults* towards children would provide better outcomes for the latter.

## The problem of capacity – or lack of it

Some older theories of rights hold that in order to be a rights-holder, a person must have the capacity to act autonomously in claiming or exercising their rights.<sup>7</sup> Others hold that in order to be afforded rights one must assume a corresponding set of responsibilities or obligations to others.<sup>8</sup> Whilst children's rights discourse has moved on in over two decades of the UNCRC, these old ideas persist and continue to influence everyday thinking on children and their social status throughout the world.<sup>9</sup> From these positions it is possible to argue that children, seen as lacking capacity and therefore unable either to demand compliance with their rights or to assume the required obligations, do not have rights, or at least are not entitled to the same rights as adults.<sup>10</sup>

Katherine Hunt Federle has shown how this notion of capacity has persistently pervaded thinking on children's rights, and how these ideas continue to obfuscate analysis of children's rights issues.<sup>11</sup> Much research effort has been devoted to demonstrating that in fact children do have more capacities than were previously recognised, in order to argue for greater respect for their rights and freedoms, particularly participation rights.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, where there is a focus on children's right to *protection*, the need for protection is founded on their supposed *incapacity*, and so the capacity issue, now turned on its head, continues to dominate the debate one way or another. Federle suggests that the question of children's capacity or incapacity is fundamentally irrelevant to arguments about children's rights, and that recognising this allows us to move towards an alternative approach based on notions of power, powerlessness and empowerment:

“Ensuring that the most powerless have rights is to accord them respect and acknowledge their value, to recognize and hear their claims; in turn, making claims mitigates exclusion and alters hierarchy... A right, in its fundamental sense, is power held by the powerless.”<sup>13</sup>

A more pragmatic approach to the issue of children's capacity, or supposed lack of it, is found in the notion of “The evolving capacities of the child”. This important concept in children's rights discourse, which has a significant bearing on questions of equality, has no equivalent in discourses of other manifestations of inequality such as gender or race. The expression is found in the above-mentioned Article 5 of the UN Convention, where parents and guardians are expected to provide “appropriate direction and guidance” to the child in the exercise of his or her rights “in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child”. In the extensive discussion and analysis of this concept, a landmark has been Gerison Lansdown's *The evolving capacities of the child*, published by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in 2005.<sup>14</sup> While the Convention itself guarantees the same rights to all children, the evolving capacities concept suggests that these rights must be interpreted and exercised differently at different stages of development. Babies and infants have little space for self-determination or autonomous decision-making, depending heavily on the “appropriate direction and guidance”, not to mention the care and protection, offered by their parents or guardians. As children grow up, however, the sphere of direction and guidance contracts, and the sphere of self-determination expands, so that older teenagers should be exercising most of the same rights as adults. It is important to note, however, that this is not a simple product of, or correlated to, chronological age. Capacities evolve in response to context, experience, culture, education and other factors. An extreme example might be children who suddenly find themselves heading a household due to the death, desertion or incapacity of their parents. Adaptation to this new role may accelerate the evolution of certain capacities beyond what would normally be expected at a particular age.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of evolving capacities thus makes it clear that at least for younger children, their 'right to exercise their rights' will in reality be circumscribed by the direction and guidance provided by parents and guardians. If this is the case, how can it be claimed that adults and children have equal rights?

### **Escape from childhood? Children's liberation**

Considering these issues, can the concept of 'equality' be meaningfully applied to relationships between children and adults, or the status of children in society? One approach is found in the "children's liberation" literature, which sees the barriers mentioned above as aspects of the oppression of children and suggests that these can and should be dismantled. A leading proponent of this ideology was John Holt who, in his 1975 book *Escape from Childhood*, put forward his proposal:

"...that the rights, privileges, duties and responsibilities of adult citizens be made available to any young person, *of whatever age*, who wants to make use of them".<sup>16</sup>

For Holt these included the right to vote and take full part in political affairs, to travel and live away from home, to choose with whom to live and/or make one's own home, to receive the same state benefits as adult citizens and "the right to do, in general, what any adult may legally do."<sup>17</sup>

These ideas were widely read and cited, and shared by other influential writers such as Richard Farson<sup>18</sup> and Martin Hoyles.<sup>19</sup> Farson and Holt drew parallels with the women's liberation movement and the US civil rights movement, pointing out that women and black people had in earlier times been considered the property of their superiors and so bound to meek obedience. In the same way that the women's liberation and civil rights movements demanded nothing less than full social and political equality for their respective oppressed groups, they proposed a revolutionary social movement that would demand the same status for children.

The controversial nature of these ideas gave rise to a backlash<sup>20</sup> and a tendency to confuse the children's liberation movement (proposing that in order to free children from their oppression they should be granted the same legal rights and liberties as adults) and the children's rights movement (proposing that children should be recognised as rights-holders, their rights defined and claimable).<sup>21</sup>

One of the problems with the children's liberation approach is that it does not provide adequately for children's right to protection, or recognise the extent to which children freely exercising their liberty may make themselves vulnerable to harm and exploitation. This can be seen clearly in relation to sexual abuse, which it must be said was little understood in the 1970s. Legally imposed ages of sexual consent (varying from country to country, but found



everywhere) can be described as a discriminatory imposition that restricts children's rights and constrains their equality. Removing the legal age of consent thus liberates children to freely explore their developing sexuality. It also, however, permits adults to manipulate, exploit and abuse them.

As the importance of children's protection rights became more widely recognised, classical children's liberation became a side-issue, while children as rights-holders became mainstream doctrine, particularly through the ratification of the UNCRC. In the 21st century, it is difficult to argue convincingly that generational or age equality should be seen as a precise analog of gender or racial equality, and there are few who maintain that equality for children implies identical legal rights and liberties for all.

But if it doesn't, what does it imply?

### **Adultism**

The above discussion at least establishes some things that equality in relations between children and adults does not mean:

- It does not mean that adults and children can be expected to fulfil identical or even equivalent social roles (though sometimes circumstances may force them to);
- It does not mean equivalence between the responsibilities adults have towards children and those that children have towards adults;
- It does not mean that the power held by children and adults can be completely equalised (though power difference can certainly be reduced);
- It does not mean the question can be avoided as children will grow up to be adults soon enough;
- It does not mean equal rights and liberties before the law. Laws will continue to be made prohibiting children from doing things that adults are permitted to do.

What then can it mean?

One helpful approach is to define and tackle 'adultism'. The term itself has been around since the 1970s<sup>22</sup> and has an obvious correlation with 'sexism' and 'racism'. Like these other terms, various definitions have been suggested over the years.<sup>23</sup>

The definition proposed here comes from the work of a Nicaraguan community education organisation called CESEMA that works with children and young people on that country's coffee plantations, supporting them in the promotion and defence of their rights.<sup>24</sup>

The CESESMA team defines adultism as:

“...a belief system based on the idea that the adult human being is in some sense superior to the child or of greater worth, and thus the child, by default, inferior or of lesser worth. The term also describes social structures, practices and behaviours based on these beliefs. These beliefs find support in a persistent view of the child as an object, and not a human rights holder. This construction of the child as an object can be found in both its traditional form, which views the child as property of his or her parents and a source of cheap labour, and in a more modern manifestation where the child is treated as an object of social interventions ‘in its best interests’ without being given the chance to express an opinion or to have his or her specific needs recognised and taken into account”.<sup>25</sup>

### **The challenge to adultism offers a new way to see ‘equality’**

This analysis of adultism offers us a new way to conceptualise ‘equality’ in child-adult relations: The idea that the child and the adult are of equal worth; neither is superior or inferior to the other.<sup>26</sup> The obvious differences between child and adult are recognised and respected, but a more fundamental, or underlying, equality can be posited.

#### *Equality as rights-holders*

It is accepted as fundamental that children and adults are rights-holding subjects (“sujetos de derecho” in Spanish). Specific rights may be afforded to children as children (this is what the UNCRC does), and specific liberties restricted (which is the reality of local laws and customs around the world). Yet a fundamental equality resides in everyone’s equal right to claim, demand and defend their rights, or have this done on their behalf if necessary, and to expect and insist that duty-bearers fulfil their obligations. At the same time children and adults alike have an equal responsibility to respect the rights of all others – regardless of age.

#### *Equality as ends and not means*

The principle that every human being must be treated as an end in him- or herself, and cannot be used as a means to some other end, was formulated by Immanuel Kant in the 18th century. And yet, all around the world, we see children treated by adults as means to their own selfish ends. Children are recruited into armies and paramilitary groups, children are used in drug-running, children are exploited sexually, and in more general terms, children are exploited as a source of cheap labour, both by employers and by their own families. A Nicaraguan NGO leader explained it thus:

“Children are seen as an extension of the family’s property. In the same way as the father considers himself owner of the smallholding, the cow, the pig, the hens; at this cultural level,

he is also owner of the children. Children are reified – seen as a thing, an object, as labour, guaranteeing to the parents that the labour force continues.”<sup>27</sup>

It is this kind of thinking that the concept of equality proposed here sets out to challenge and gradually eliminate.

### *Equality of human dignity*

Finally children and adults are equal in having inherent human dignity. The idea of human beings equal in dignity is another old and venerable concept. It is found in the United Nations Charter and in the opening words of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child starts with these words:

“The States Parties to the present Convention, considering that, in accordance with the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ... have agreed as follows:”

It can be argued that in much of the ‘non-Western’ world it is traditional ideas of human dignity that provide the basis for promoting and ensuring justice and equity between people, rather than the concept of human rights founded in western liberalism.<sup>28</sup> What is clear from the wider literature is that in much of the world the idea of dignity is more readily recognised, understood and internalised than that of rights.<sup>29</sup> Equality of human dignity – in this wide-ranging, culturally flexible sense – is thus a third key element of our alternative concept of equality between children and adults.

Reconfigured in this way, the idea of equality can and must continue to claim central importance in how we speak of relationships between children and adults, and how we actively strive to improve the quality of these relationships in the post 2015 world. It means children and adults have equality as holders and, where necessary, defenders of human rights (albeit with specific rights for children and specific responsibilities for adults acknowledged and understood). It means no human being, adult or child, can be used as a means to somebody else’s selfish end. And it means that wherever they live, and whatever the reality of their daily lives, adults and children are equal as holders of inherent human dignity.

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- <sup>5</sup> O'Neill, O. (1988). Children's rights and children's lives. *Ethics*, 98(3), 445-463 (p 463).
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p 463.
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- <sup>17</sup> Holt, J. C. op. cit. p16.
- <sup>18</sup> Farson, R. E. (1974). *Birthrights*. New York: Macmillan.
- <sup>19</sup> Hoyles, M. (1979). *Changing childhood*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.
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<sup>21</sup> Freeman, M. op. cit. p xxiii.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Flasher, J. (1978). Adultism. *Adolescence*, 13(51), 517-23.

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<sup>25</sup> Shier et al. (2012) op cit. p6.

<sup>26</sup> There is an issue of how to square these ideas with understandings grounded in different cultures. Nicaragua's contemporary culture is a syncretic blend of indigenous Central American tradition, Roman Catholicism imposed by the Spanish conquistadores, African elements from the African peoples brought to Nicaragua by British slave-traders, and a substantial legacy of 20th century revolutionary socialism: where the idea that "no-one is greater or lesser than me" is easy to assimilate. The African Children's Charter cited above, however, posits that there are people in the community that children should regard as "superiors", which doesn't rest easily with the ideas suggested here. There may be a resolution to be found in a more nuanced analysis of what it means to be a "superior" in different cultures, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Shier, H. (2010). Children as public actors: Navigating the tensions. *Children & Society*, 24, 24-37.

<sup>28</sup> Donnelly, J. (1982). Human rights and human dignity: An analytic critique of non-western conceptions of human rights. *The American Political Science Review*, 76(2), 303-316.

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