

Child rights and aid: mutually exclusive?

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on the visibility of child rights in
donor action**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – 20 years old in November 2009 – has encouraged states to develop clearer strategies, policies and programmes to promote child wellbeing. State obligation to report regularly on progress to the Committee on the Rights of the Child has heightened a sense of accountability.

The UNCRC encourages international cooperation explicitly, by calling for a focus on the needs of children in developing countries, in particular their rights to education and health. It could be said that the spirit of the entire Convention is one of international cooperation. But a review of selected concluding observations to the Committee suggests no consistent methodology or guidance for state parties in their reporting on international cooperation or for the Committee on whether development cooperation for children is informed by a human rights approach (Harper et al., forthcoming). Donor action on children's rights is not rigorously monitored or assessed, except informally by civil society and irregularly by the expert Committee.

This note summarises a study by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre on the visibility of children's rights in donor action, and how much the new aid modalities of the Paris Agenda enable or hinder progress on the UNCRC. It sees donor actions in a broader analysis of rights, making comparisons with other crosscutting issues, such as gender, HIV/AIDS and the environment, drawing on case studies of donor policy and programming (Harper, et al., forthcoming; Jones et al., forthcoming).

Why think about children and aid?

The UNCRC aims to raise the visibility of children and their right to a minimum level of development and

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wellbeing, and to highlight the responsibility of state actors to ensure implementation and of the international community to support resource- and capacity-constrained developing countries. Ratification and signature by all but two countries (the USA and Somalia), and the development of national action plans for children in many countries, suggest that the Convention has raised the profile of children. Periodic reports by governments and corresponding shadow reports by national non-governmental organisations (NGO) groups to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) have also demonstrated considerable progress since 1990 in the realisation of children's rights.

The visibility of children's rights within donor policies and action is less clear cut, and has received surprisingly little attention from academics or practitioners (Maguire, 2007). The words 'aid' and 'children' rarely feature in the same fora, and certainly not in high-level debates on aid effectiveness. There seems to be an assumption that aid for child rights flows naturally through aid systems, given the increasingly coordinated work on poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and that correcting flaws in the system will improve child wellbeing.

The 2005 Paris Declaration was a landmark agreement, as the forging of new aid modalities was long overdue. Before this, the overloading of developing countries with projects, missions and donor demands, poor capacity building records, tied aid and resource misappropriation drove demands for urgent reform. Between 2001 and 2005, there were, on average, 33 donors operating in each partner country (IDA, 2007). There has since been a shift from project-based lending to budget support and sector-wide approaches (SWAps), realigning power and leadership with recipient countries and re-emphasising the importance of poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs), which have evolved into national development plans (NDPs) and joint assistance strategies (JASs). There is more focus on the 'nuts and bolts' aspects of aid delivery mechanisms, such as public financial management, public procurement and

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harmonisation of related donor procedures (Shine and Paris, 2008). Aid modalities are changing, although the funding shift towards programme and sector support has not been as great as commitments implied. A survey by the Strategic Partnership with Africa (SPA) found that general budget support (GBS) accounts for, in aggregate, only 20-25% of total aid for selected committed GBS donors in Africa (Williamson and Kizilbash, 2008).

When it comes to child wellbeing, the prevalent view is that the Paris agenda ‘only affects the ways in which donors deliver aid, not the content of that aid’ (DAC personnel interview, 2008). However, the linked processes for aid delivery demand new levels of negotiation between donors and governments, in fora where specific issues, such as child wellbeing, may fall off the agenda through lack of common agreement and support. Those working for child wellbeing view the Paris agenda with caution. Child rights are not always well established in aid programmes. Viewed as a ‘cross-cutting’ or ‘special interest’ issue, children can suffer from the policy evaporation that has plagued attempts to mainstream other human rights issues. Despite the well-known flaws of project-based lending, it did allow a much-needed focus on child wellbeing in some contexts that does not always emerge in the new modes of negotiation. Given the poor child rights record in many developing (and developed) countries it cannot be assumed that governments are committed to child rights outcomes or that they have the resources and know-how to achieve them. It is vital to ensure that ‘aid and children’ discussions are not awkward bedfellows, but become, instead, part of mainstream aid agendas.

Conceptualising visibility of child rights

Defining child rights. The conceptualisation of child rights in donor agencies and the way this feeds into policy and practice is very significant for their achievement. In least developed and low-income countries, children under 18 comprise up to 50% of the population. Without a comprehensive vision, implementation of children’s rights will always be partial. The UNCRC aims for the progressive realisation of children’s rights. This needs a long-term vision, not only of how and when child rights might be achieved, but also of the incremental steps to realising rights, including sequencing, prioritisation and the implications of ‘progressive realisation’ for the indivisibility of rights.

Human rights principles cover: indivisibility (all rights have equal value); inalienability (they cannot be withdrawn), non-discrimination, the rule of law and participation. Child rights principles, enshrined in the UNCRC, include: crosscutting issues of the best interests of the child and non-discrimination; and core principles of survival (nutrition and health), development (education and psychological support);

participation (in decisions that affect children’s lives according to their age); and protection (from violence, abuse and neglect). Were donor agencies to build human and child rights into their core thinking, these principles should be clear in core strategy documents and, therefore, in programming. For example, the indivisibility of child rights would be shown by addressing the multidimensional nature of childhood deprivation and a recognition that addressing poverty in general may not benefit children without a child-sensitive lens (given what we know about the unequal intra-household distribution of resources and decision-making power).

This does not mean that donors need to do everything themselves, but policy and programming decisions would be based on an understanding of the range of children’s entitlements and, importantly, the way these entitlements relate to each other in a national strategy for children. For example, educational entitlements underpin development, but nutrition supports education, and both are enhanced by other entitlements, such as access to drinking water and sanitation, and none of these can work to full benefit without participation and empowerment. If children’s rights were part of the organisational fabric of donor practice, child protection would be seen in donors’ internal principles as well as external practice, with a child protection policy applied by all staff in their daily work, particularly those in contact with children.

Needs approaches versus rights approaches. This is an issue in several donor agencies, articulated most vocally by the humanitarian sector, which claims that there is an obligation only to meet needs. It could be argued that a needs-based analysis incorporates more easily ideas of incremental gain, phasing in one agenda (e.g. education), then another (e.g. enhanced health services). This is often the reality of programming, although it is derived from a partial assessment of needs, pursuit of specific donor agendas and a failure to listen to children and their caregivers.

A rights approach, however, recognises that, by incorporating indivisibility, participation and non-discrimination from the start, a focus on all entitlements leads to better and more sustainable outcomes (Waterston and Goldhagen, 2007). Obligations under the UNCRC allow progressive realisation of rights if duty-bearers show progress over time in line with their resource capacities.

However, this dialogue about rights and needs reflects fundamental beliefs, including perceptions that rights are not culturally neutral and emanate from the North, and that rights are legalistic and require a legal mindset. Some critics argue that rights cannot be implemented because it is too expensive, and that there are ‘too many’ special interest groups with competing rights claims. In reality, a rights-based approach champions broader principles of inclusion and is a bedrock of democratic governance (Sen, 1999). There are those who feel that

rights are already being implemented, given the focus on children's needs in health and education. Participation and empowerment, however, pre-date the UNCRC, and have been pivotal features of development for decades. Finally, in some situations, rights approaches are seen as too political and too long-term for the short-term donor interventions envisaged.

These perceptions point perhaps to the failure of child rights advocates to present rights as gains for programming, particularly the importance of accountability and the premise of rights as not just promises, but entitlements demanding national and international responses. This core element of entitlement can turn perceptions of the poor from needy and (by implication) 'deserving' to 'claimants' and 'undeserving' (CPRC, 2008). While children are rarely seen as the 'undeserving' poor, their parents often are (Krishna et al., 2004), and changing such perceptions matters: the alleviation of adult poverty and realisation of adult rights is vital for the realisation of children's rights (Platt, 2003).

There is both intrinsic and instrumental value in implementing rights (OECD, 2006). The former is part of a moral and legal obligation: changing perceptions of poverty from a state of need to one of entitlement and enabling compliance with international law. The latter is a pragmatic approach leading to effective development outcomes: addressing the poverty of children can

have long-term payoffs, with the benefits carried over a lifetime, and even into the next generation.

There is, therefore, a need for a shift in thinking to ensure that rights are central to development policy and programming. For some, this would require a turnaround in current practice. The start point is a clear understanding of how agencies work towards child wellbeing and the place of child and human rights in their thinking and practice, with a need to assess how strategic aid agencies are in understanding and implementing the components of a child rights strategy.

Visibility of child rights versus other crosscutting issues. Our analysis of donor agency practice focuses on seven key areas that can help build an understanding of how child wellbeing can be achieved through aid. This framework (Box 1) allows us to capture different dimensions of the visibility of rights, from strategy to programme implementation levels, and from the development of staff resources to budget allocation decisions.

This framework is a useful tool to assess the consistency of efforts to promote the visibility of children's rights within and among donor agencies. An understanding of the prioritisation of children's rights by a specific donor requires an understanding of the way in which child-related issues are addressed in comparison with other crosscutting issues, such as gender, environment and HIV/AIDS. The integration of such issues into

Box 1: A framework to assess the visibility of child rights

A focus on the content of agency strategies and policies and their translation into programmes reveals how children are conceptualised and integrated into aid systems. It allows us to assess the extent to which children are either mainstreamed into broader poverty reduction, good governance, humanitarian aid and capacity development policies and programmes or are the objects of specific child-focused policies and programmes. We would expect greater visibility to be reflected in the integration of child rights concepts in core documents and procedures, including high-level government agreements and papers, sector, regional and country strategies and funding instruments, capacity strengthening, technical assistance and multilateral and non-governmental partnership agreements. The focus of programmes also reveals the integration and analysis of what leads to child wellbeing. For example, to what extent has the indivisibility of rights been understood and decisions made across the four areas of survival, development, protection and participation, and the associated institutional analysis, which may lead to the support of often weak ministries of social welfare, women and children, among others.

Linkages and networks constitute a third level of visibility. This includes relationships with, and support to, inter-governmental and non-governmental agencies working on children's issues as well as coordination mechanisms among donors and other domestic government agencies.

The **level of funding** for child wellbeing is an important indicator of commitments and intended outcomes. Without clear input and output indicators, this is difficult to trace in absolute terms, but approximations can be made. Comparing actual amounts with strategies to achieve outcomes also illustrates how strategic an agency is being, and whether child rights have been understood clearly and incorporated adequately into plans in line with the amount invested. For example, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) spends an estimated one-sixth of its annual budget on child-related areas but has no overall strategy on child rights.

Institutional positioning is our fifth measure of visibility, assessing the implicit and stated position of the organisation with regard to rights and children's rights. Some agencies place rights at the centre of their agenda, others are orientated around poverty elimination or the MDGs, but support rights to greater or lesser degrees. This positioning is itself informed by an aid agency's own national and cultural approach to rights, which seeps across all government institutions, in part because individuals themselves reproduce their own national understandings.

Reflecting positioning and commitment, our sixth measure relates to human resources devoted to child and human rights, both the positions and the seniority accorded to them and the mandate as reflected in job descriptions. Thus, the mandate of DFID's senior management team to 'champion' gender would reflect a high level of commitment in this area.

The final measure is **integration into research and knowledge management strategies**, whereby the volume of funding, types of issues researched, relative investment in documentation of best practice strategies and knowledge sharing mechanisms both internally and externally reflect donor commitments and understandings.

a range of development interventions across sectors, strategies, programmes and projects is an approach that attempts to counter the ‘ghettoising’ effect of separating such areas and a recognition that addressing these issues effectively requires multiple entry points (Mukhopdhyay et al., 2006). However, a ‘mainstreaming’ approach may suffer from ‘policy evaporation’: the issue is supposed to touch on everyone’s work but, in reality, is nobody’s prime responsibility. It is a struggle first to develop understanding and maintain awareness of these agendas, and then to develop appropriate policy and practice (Moser and Moser, 2005).

Gender, in particular, has been more effectively mainstreamed than child rights issues, as have HIV/AIDS and the environment. There is increasing use of gender-sensitive indicators to measure progress in integrating gender across international development sectors, including Germany’s project marker system (with all projects assessed by a gender advisor for gender sensitivity and those without a gender-related component having to justify that lack before project approval is granted) and the DAC gender marker (which tracks total spend on gender equality in overall international development funding). Gender machineries across government ministries tend to be more established, providing staff who are working on gender equality issues with greater (though still limited) institutional clout. Most agencies have clear mainstreaming strategies on HIV/AIDS and have invested substantially in prevention and mitigation programmes (e.g. Uggla, 2007), although this is beginning to decline, as the geographically contained nature of the epidemic has become more apparent. Mainstreaming environmental sustainability remains a significant challenge, but funding levels are sub-

stantial (e.g. the European Commission (EC), despite a large fall in 2006, committed the largest level of aid between 2000 and 2006 towards activities whose principal objective is the environment) and there has also been considerable investment in research on environmental issues, especially in the context of debates on climate change.

Similarities and differences among donors

Drawing on the framework outlined above, our analysis of six key Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) bilateral donors (Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, the UK and Sweden) and the European Union (EU) reveals similarities among donors but also significant differences and the need for greater donor coordination and communication if the multidimensionality of child rights is to be tackled effectively. The DAC provides a potential forum for donor coordination, given its broad support for human rights (Box 2).

Strategy content and translation into programmes.

The visibility of children’s rights is medium to high in development cooperation strategies in most case study countries: in Belgium and Austria, child rights are a crosscutting issue, while in Canada and Sweden there are specific child-related policy strategies. In Germany and the UK the level of visibility is relatively lower: child rights are subsumed under broader human rights strategies, with relatively little space within these. Similarly, there is consensus that, where strategies exist, there is a reasonable level of follow through at the programme level, but room for improvement. In particular, there is a pressing need for more effective communication and support between headquarters and country level, and the development and

Box 2: Child and human rights in OECD-DAC

The advancement of children’s rights has not had a particularly high profile in the OECD-DAC (www.oecd.org/dac). Some specific aspects of child wellbeing are advanced, such as through health and education, where children’s rights can be assessed more explicitly, or through such areas as violent conflict, where children’s rights are captured in guidelines. Child rights as a comprehensive agenda are articulated more generally under broader discussions of human rights. In 1997, the DAC affirmed that human rights were an essential part of development cooperation and in 2007 a policy paper outlined 10 core principles to serve as ‘basic orientations’ to rights, where harmonised donor action is of particular importance. This paper was approved by a majority of DAC members, with only two opposing it. However, there remains resistance to ‘rights’ in the DAC, by a powerful minority. This was reflected in the 2007 policy paper which included only two references to children’s rights. Greater coverage, however, was given to children in a 2006 publication on integrating human rights in development (OECD, 2006). This book suggests that DAC members ‘have successfully operationalised the CRC principles’ (a questionable assessment, given less glowing reviews from the expert CRC) and presents a number of examples of good practice of child rights programming. More generally, the OECD has a range of work on child wellbeing focused on OECD countries and linked to the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs. Overall, however, the DAC approach to child rights appears fragmented compared to its work on other crosscutting issues, such as gender. The latter not only has a cross-agency network (GENDERNET) and, through the strategic use of statistics and the introduction of a gender equality policy marker, gender advocates have advanced the issue within DAC member agencies (see OECD-DAC, 2009). The potential for the DAC to repeat this success on other human rights issues has attracted interest (Jespersen and Benn, 2007). The DAC, however, has a limited creditor marker system, and staff interviewed at the DAC felt there were limitations to its expansion. More generally, however, child rights advocates could look at how gender has been advanced in the DAC, recognising the long timeframe required for its evolution, and a very strategic use of statistics and the policy marker to compare donor achievements and failures and, therefore, use peer pressure to stimulate donor action.

implementation of more robust child-sensitive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. There remains an imperative to ‘justify’ the prioritisation and specific consideration of children across policies and programmes, for intrinsic and/or instrumental reasons. Without a clear rationale for considering children explicitly, childhood will continue to be relegated to the category of ‘special interest’.

Level of funding. It is difficult to assess levels of funding for child rights policies and programming because of the sectoral organisation of governments as well as the dearth of age-disaggregated data. As a result, with the exception of DFID, our analysis was unable to estimate approximate spending on child rights among core donors, as information is not collected and no efforts have been made to address this. DFID, through its overall programme outcome indicators (a number of them child-focused), was able to estimate that one-sixth of agency spend is on or related to children (although this includes wider sectoral infrastructure investments). While the methodology could be questioned, at least DFID can provide such figures, suggesting a good level of transparency and accountability. More robust and comparable indicators on relative investment are critical if the principle of the indivisibility of rights is to be fulfilled. Although there is a relatively high level of international visibility of education, health and nutrition issues (partly as a result of the MDGs and the global Education For All (EFA) initiative), lower priority has been accorded to children’s rights to protection and participation, especially (but not exclusively) in developing countries. As a result, a specific focus on understanding and measuring protection and participation is urgently required.

Institutional positioning and human resource allocations. The overall institutional positioning of teams and staff with child rights portfolios in donor agencies is one of relative marginalisation. Belgium, Germany, the EU, Canada and Sweden have specific child rights focal points, but these are under-funded and understaffed, and there are only informal cross-institutional mechanisms to ensure greater prominence of child rights issues within broader development debates. In terms of staff levels, the picture ranges from DFID, where child rights constitutes just part of the portfolio of a single advisory post, to Canada, Sweden and especially Germany, with a number of dedicated posts on a range of child rights (particularly child protection). The EU, with its larger, and more complex machinery, has more positions but a much larger mandate. Sweden, Germany and Canada have highly specialised staff, but this is, in part, a result of historical investments, not current policies. Relatively little attention is given to fostering child rights expertise and there is little or no inclusion of child rights issues in staff inductions.

Integration into research and knowledge management strategies. The extent to which donors integrate child rights concerns into their research and knowledge management strategies varies widely. DFID may be most active in this area, having funded two multi-year multi-country research projects on childhood poverty. Both were initiated by NGOs, but DFID has provided substantial funding and knowledge management support to both the Childhood Poverty Research and Policy Centre (CHIP) and Young Lives projects and supports research in health and education. Canada established a child protection research fund in 2001 and, although it has been disbanded, it continues to host an extranet site on child rights and protection, with biweekly newsletters distributed to over 300 key stakeholders in the field. Neither Sweden nor Germany has invested significant funding in research on child rights issues, but both have invested considerably in best practice documentation (Harper et al., forthcoming). Belgium and Austria do not have a related research portfolio, although Austria is committed, in general, to an evidence-based policy approach but admits this is still weakly implemented in relation to child rights. The EU has substantial research funds but navigating available research funds is a major undertaking, with institutions dedicating staff to this pursuit in order to access funds.

Linkages and networks. The relatively marginalised position of child rights focal point staff in most donor agencies means that linkages and networks with other governmental, non-governmental and multilateral agencies have been limited – the result of resource constraints. However, stronger networks and cross-agency coordination mechanisms could help to overcome this relative isolation.

Overall levels of networking and even awareness of other donor activities related to child and youth rights issues are very low. There is no donor working group on children as there is for gender and, with the exception of Austria, and to a lesser extent Sweden and the UK, there is no concerted strategy to link with other donors at headquarters level. In Austria, in part because of the overall low resource base and a geographic focus on South Eastern Europe, child rights work has been coordinated through a broader sub-regional Stability Pact. While Sweden and the UK do not enjoy a broad level of coordination around child rights issues, they have signed a joint multi-year agreement of support to UNICEF, to enhance the agency’s strategic capacities as it moves from being a service delivery organisation to being a more policy advocacy-focused institution. At the country level, despite greater overall coordination under GBS systems and participation in donor–government sector working groups, there has been little or no coordination on child rights issues specifically.

Turning to domestic linkages, with the exceptions of Austria and Canada, ministries with international development portfolios tend to have limited coordination with other government agencies working on child-related issues. This is shown by the low level of engagement by such ministries in the periodic reporting to the CRC. However, the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) has helped integrate child rights into other government departments through, for example, training soldiers on child rights issues in conflict contexts, and close cooperation with the Ministry of Education through the implementation of the Stability Pact. Outreach across government departments is facilitated through a Special Advisor on Child Rights within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Finally, linkages with civil society groups are more active, as illustrated by the creation by DFID in 2007 of Civil Society Taskforces on Children and on Youth and by regular liaison with child rights civil society umbrella groups in Belgium, Sweden and Germany.

Conceptualising visibility at a country level

The entry points for donors to promote the visibility of children's rights at country level depend on donor architecture and governance characteristics. The level of aid dependence of a particular country is a critical variable. The possible influence of donors in low-income and least developed countries in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Ethiopia or Sierra Leone) is higher than in middle-income countries such as India or Peru.

The extent to which GBS principles are being implemented also mediates donor influence. Countries such as Ghana and Tanzania already enjoy up to 40% GBS out of the total aid volume received; others have yet to qualify (CAPE, 2006). In countries with high levels of GBS, individual donor priorities may receive lower priority, as donors are committing to supporting NDPs in the name of national ownership and donor alignment and harmonisation. The key entry point for influence is participation in donor–government sector working groups and the dialogue framework that countries are agreeing

Box 3: Implementing Paris: Implications for children's rights in Vietnam and Nicaragua

As part of the ODI/Innocenti Research Centre study on the visibility of children's rights in donor action, case studies were undertaken in five countries: Ethiopia; Nicaragua; Sierra Leone; Tanzania and Vietnam – to explore the linkages between divergent country experiences of the implementation of the Paris Agenda and initial impacts on the visibility of children's rights (Jones et al., forthcoming). Here we present key findings from two cases: Vietnam and Nicaragua.

Vietnam is a good test case for an exploration of the ways in which successful implementation of the Paris Agenda principles has affected the amount of attention given to child rights issues. Not only is Vietnam a country with a high level of GBS, but it is also a developmental state with a strong track record in poverty reduction and improved child wellbeing indicators. In addition, it is one of 10 pilot countries in the One UN reform initiative, to harmonise all UN-related activity into a unified country strategy and a single country office. Evidence suggests, however, that the impact of these reforms has been mixed in terms of the visibility of children's rights.

On the one hand, stakeholder interviews suggested that donors in Vietnam are active in supporting a range of programmes addressing children's rights and that this trend has improved markedly over the past decade. Donors that do not have child-focused mandates are now supporting programmes to strengthen universal primary and secondary education; the World Bank in particular has worked recently with the government to promote grassroots participation, including child participation in the formulation of the national five-year development plan, as well as the national youth strategy.

On the other hand, most UN, bilateral and multilateral agencies working in Vietnam are more in favour of supporting the strengthening of economic and institutional development, which is perceived to benefit children indirectly, rather than being aware of the importance of also approaching even macro-level interventions through a child-sensitive lens. In addition, there is a general concern that a critical child rights situation analysis section is missing in all donor country situation analyses and, as a result, mainstreaming children into the aid agenda depends mainly on individual donors' doing this voluntarily, rather than fulfilling responsibilities identified in development assistance strategies. The situation has been further complicated by the decline in the institutional status of the main government agency in Vietnam dealing with children's issues, from an independent national-level committee to a ministerial department.

Nicaragua qualified for GBS in 2002 during the administration of President Bolanos, which prioritised international integration and courted Northern donors. During this period, Nicaragua received an estimated 8% of GDP from aid, making it one of the most aid-dependent countries in Latin America. Since the election of Sandanista leader, Daniel Ortega to the Presidency in 2006, there have been marked shifts in relationships with bilateral and multilateral donors. The new president has pursued a Latin American and Nicaraguan-focused agenda and disbanded the majority of donor–government working groups and networks set up to monitor and implement international agreements. Combined with allegations of fraud, this has led to the discontinuation of financial support from the World Bank, USA and EU. President Ortega has instead courted Venezuela, from where substantial aid is flowing, as well as Cuba and Iran.

Against this political backdrop, the visibility of child rights has also undergone significant changes. The government has, for the most part, dismantled pre-existing programmes concerning children, as well as sidelining the main governmental children's agency mandated. The government has rejected global norms relating to child rights (including the UNCRC) which it perceives to be linked to unwanted donor conditionalities and 'strings', and instead is promoting an emphasis on family values. Moreover, a new focus on national ownership has led to the development of a new centralised social protection programme focused on children led by the First Lady, called 'Programme Love'. UNICEF is supporting this programme but other donors are concerned about the governance implications of this style of programme and have either withdrawn or not offered support.

on a bilateral basis with Southern governments.

A third important variable relates to governance arrangements. There may be more potential to influence development agendas and outcomes in states that have a strong developmental agenda (e.g. Vietnam or Ethiopia) and a level of accountability to the citizenry (e.g. Tanzania) than in neo-patrimonial states where the focus is on cultivating patronage relationships (e.g. Court et al., 2005). However, a growing school of thought believes that opportunities to promote development and human wellbeing may be greater in fragile and post-conflict state contexts, as there is a strong impetus to develop new state–citizen contracts and demonstrate the responsiveness of a government to cement its authority (e.g. Sierra Leone) (MacDonald, 2008).

Finally, the introduction of new aid instruments over the past decade has enhanced the profile of certain actors in aid-dependent countries, along with new power dynamics. Planning ministries may take the lead, but aid and aid coordination are, in general, dealt with by ministries of finance, working with other key planning institutions. Key individuals in line ministries are permanent secretaries, with, in many cases, only limited delegation below this level. Their relative importance is reinforced by the availability of specific types of national fora and policy decision-making spaces. Typically, aid decisions are made either in donor-only fora (donor groups) or in donor–government fora (consultative groups), which often have working-level sub-groups focusing on particular issues. These meet regularly to discuss coordination issues. Although efforts have been made to promote broader local participation, there is growing concern that non-governmental actors are relatively marginalised (Svoboda et al., 2008). The number of funding windows available to NGOs is contracting as GBS replaces project-based funding, and civil society actors have, to date, been relegated to observer status (if anything) within donor–government sector working groups.

Conclusions and policy implications

Although donors have taken important steps in their role as duty-bearers for the UNCRC, child rights have been accorded far less visibility than other crosscutting issues. Much needs to be done 20 years on from the birth of the UNCRC to strengthen donor action: developing a clear strategy to deliver on international child rights obligations in policy and related strategic objectives (and within this, justifying the rationale for a child focus); programme implementation; M&E; adequate investment of human and financial resources; and creating effective coordination mechanisms among domestic and international government, NGO and multilateral actors. Our analysis points to the following key policy implications.

Creation of a cross-donor working group on child

rights. To enhance information sharing, lesson learning and coordination among isolated development cooperation staff working on child rights issues, the establishment of a cross-donor working group on child rights could help to fulfil more effectively the Paris Declaration principles of alignment and harmonisation. The DAC’s GENDERNET is a potential model. Such a coordination mechanism would facilitate a more systematic overview of the balance of investment in different clusters of children’s rights (survival, development, protection and participation), identify key knowledge and programming gaps and help to share examples of good practice and lessons learned.

Development of a child-focused M&E system. One of the gaps across donors (with the partial exception of DFID) is the absence of a clear M&E system of child rights policy and programme implementation. While including another DAC marker, along the lines of the existing gender marker, may not be feasible given donor resistance to the proliferation of issues against which they should report, there is an urgent need to establish at least a light-touch M&E system in each donor agency in the name of transparency and accountability. This is important given the major shifts in the international aid architecture over the past five years and the very limited knowledge of the impact of these changes on the fulfilment of children’s rights in aid-dependent countries. A particular focus on protection and participation is needed, alongside the more commonly measured survival and development indicators. Indeed, the development of such an approach could be one of the first projects undertaken by a cross-donor working group on child rights, followed by semi-regular reviews and experience-sharing fora to address challenges and bottlenecks as they emerge.

Establishment of a peer review mechanism. Another important channel could be the establishment of a peer review mechanism under the umbrella of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Established in 2006, this unique process is a state-driven process under the auspices of the Human Rights Council, with a review of the human rights records of all 192 UN Member States once every four years – with every country reviewed by 2011. The aim is to improve the human rights situation in all countries and to address human rights violations wherever they occur. Such an initiative would enhance the incentive for international development ministries to take greater responsibility for delivering against child rights goals, including contributing to the periodic state reports to the CRC.

Embedding an understanding of child vulnerabilities and children’s rights in core policy documents. Donor agencies must develop and share clear strategies on child rights, so that key stakeholders are aware of their commitments. This would support the inclusion of child rights issues in country situation analyses

and assistance plans. An internal child rights strategy needs to be developed to facilitate the rationale for a child focus and the tools to enable it. Senior management support is essential to ensure commitment.

Practical guidance. Finally, given the institutional constraints faced by many development cooperation agencies in expanding staff headcount and spreading existing staff thinly over multiple issues, donors could consider outsourcing child rights expertise, following the model used by Sweden in the creation of gender and environmental helpdesks. Given the existence of a vibrant child-focused civil society within the OECD, donors could establish a mechanism whereby govern-

ment officials could request information on certain dimensions of child rights, to be fielded by a coordinator who allocates questions to appropriate experts to address in a timely manner. Such an approach, on issues from child-sensitive budget monitoring and analysis through to child-sensitive research design and methodologies, could ensure that officials do not miss key opportunities for a want of information and support, and that governments are able to tap into a richer pool of expertise than would be available if they were to rely on in-house services alone.

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- Useful resources:**
 DAC gender marker: www.oecd.org/dataoecd/0/63/37461060.pdf
 OECD work on child rights in OECD countries: <http://bit.ly/OECDchildren>
 Childhood Poverty Centre: <http://www.childhoodpoverty.org/index.php>
 Canadian child protection research fund: <http://bit.ly/canadafund>