

Children as Beneficiaries  
and Participants in  
Development Programs:  
A Case Study in Burma



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# **Children as Beneficiaries and Participants in Development Programs: A Case Study in Burma (Myanmar)**

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# Abstract

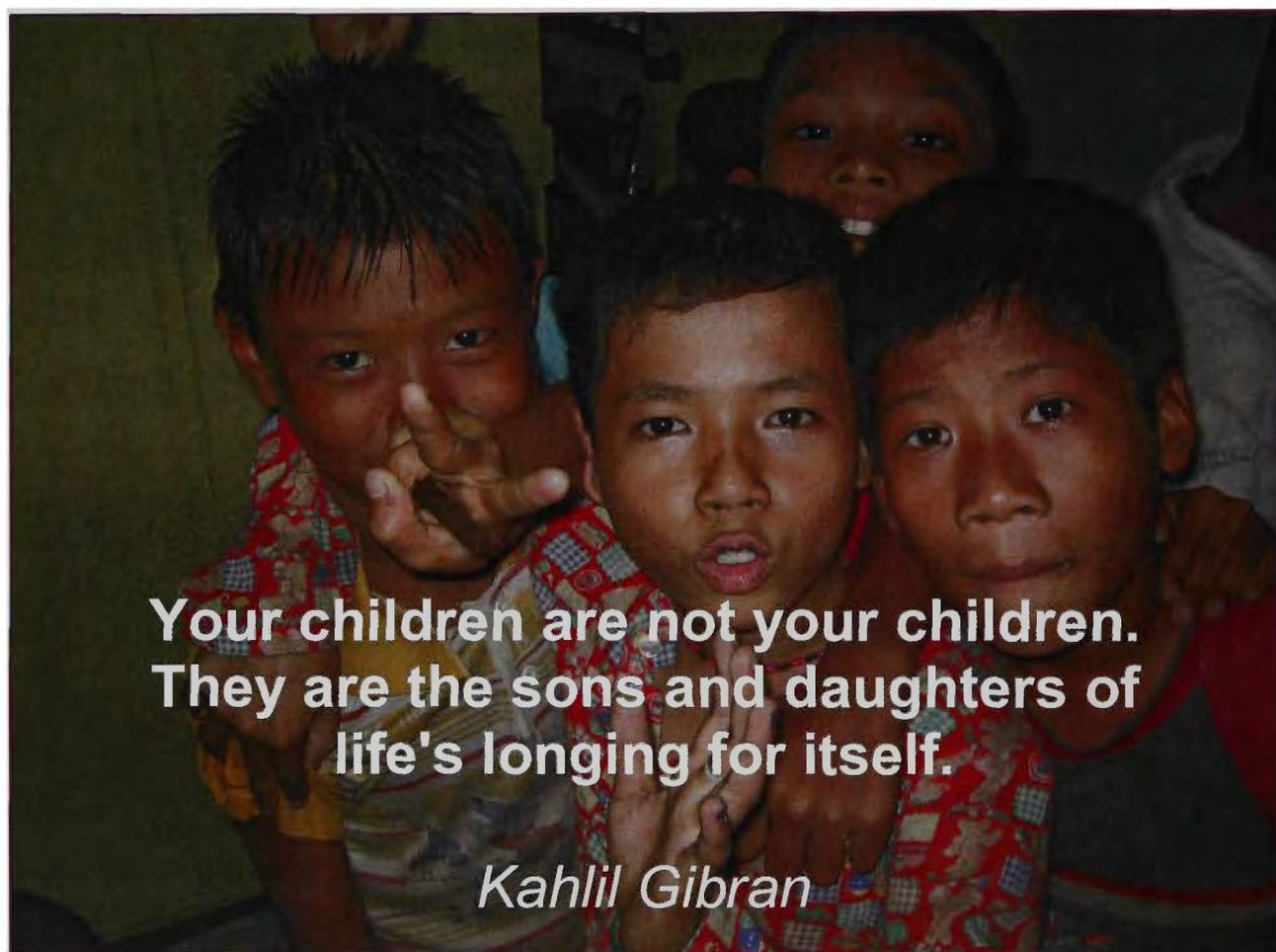
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This study seeks to understand the dynamics and processes of community development programs for children in Burma (Myanmar). It examines the ethical dimensions of children's participation, critiques the extent of participation of young people in community development activity, explores the barriers and avenues for increased participation and presents recommendations based on lived experience which can be used to formulate policies that will enable/encourage greater participation.

The development industry reaches to almost all areas of the globe and is not confined by national boundaries, ethnicity, age, gender or other social stratification. One of the most topical issues in contemporary development regards the rights of the child. It is an area of increasing interest to United Nations agencies and to human rights groups such as Amnesty International and the International Labour Organisation. In addition, a number of international programs have been created to focus upon improving the global situation of children, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Mandela and Machel's "Global Movement for Children." Such interest in the situation of children, however, rarely includes discussion of the ethical issues involved in the construction of children as appropriate subjects of development. Even rarer is examination or discussion of the culturally and historically contingent nature of assumptions about children and childhood that are built into many programs that focus upon children. The implications of applying programs and techniques that incorporate "Western" or

"generic" understandings of children and childhood upon children from non-Western nations should be part of such discussions.

Development programs increasingly employ national workers, not only as stakeholders and participants, but also as initiators of programs and as directors of resource allocation. However, with this growing trend of the participation of 'beneficiaries' of development programs in identifying needs and planning and implementing solutions, the voices of children have, until recently, been quiet.



# Table of Contents

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<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acronyms</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>Doctor of Philosophy Declaration</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Focus of the Study .....	7
Children’s participation – a complex issue .....	8
Methodology .....	12
Ethics .....	23
Overview of thesis structure.....	24
<b>Locating Participation</b> .....	<b>30</b>
Introduction .....	30
Locating participation within the community development discourse.....	33
Locating participation within the child rights discourse .....	48
A historical progression towards children’s right to participate .....	48
Key dilemmas with participation in the child rights discourse .....	52
Models of child participation .....	60
Participation and power .....	65
Locating participation within the sociology of childhood discourse .....	68
Constructions of Childhood .....	68
The ‘sociology of childhood’ .....	72
Conclusion.....	83
What are child participation ‘projects’? .....	84
Overall conclusions.....	98
<b>Children in Burma: Social, Political and Economic Context</b> .....	<b>103</b>

Introduction .....	103
The dominance of the state .....	105
Responding to fear .....	114
The impact of the Burmese state on children.....	120
Conclusions .....	141
<b>Childhood and Childhood Experiences in Burma: Narrative, Socio- Economic and Political Perspectives.....</b>	<b>144</b>
Introduction.....	144
The narrative realm of Burmese childhood .....	148
Buddhism .....	149
Stages of Life .....	167
Cultural concepts.....	178
The narrative realm - conclusion .....	182
The socio-political realm: maintaining the collective illusion .....	184
The media – we have no child soldiers! .....	186
Educational ‘excellence’ .....	192
Economic mismanagement .....	199
The socio-political realm - conclusions.....	209
The personal realm.....	211
Taking responsibility.....	211
Contributing.....	215
Decision-making.....	220
The personal realm - conclusions.....	224
Overall conclusions.....	226
<b>Organisational Approaches to Participation .....</b>	<b>234</b>
Introduction.....	234
World Vision Myanmar - working with children on the street.....	236
Background to the World Vision partnership .....	236
World Vision Myanmar .....	238
Street Children: who are they, why study them? .....	241
Street children in Myanmar.....	245
Taking to the streets.....	247
Life away from home .....	252

Genealogy of change from Welfare to Participation .....	265
Sustainable change? .....	274
The Child Focussed Network (CFN) .....	283
Phaung Daw Oo Monastic Education School .....	295
Implications and discussion .....	301
Time and praxis .....	302
Leadership .....	303
Organisational structures .....	307
Organisational history and values .....	309
Good development practice and principles .....	310
Social capital .....	312
Conclusion .....	314
<b>Participation: A New Framework for Analysis .....</b>	<b>316</b>
Introduction .....	316
A new framework for understanding child participation .....	319
Basic principles of the framework .....	320
Types of participation .....	322
Realms of influence .....	324
<b>New Horizons for Participation .....</b>	<b>329</b>
Implications for theoretical frameworks .....	329
Implications for international and local child-focussed organisations in Burma..	334
Principles of engagement .....	340
Areas for further research and exploration .....	344
Conclusion .....	347
<b>Epilogue .....</b>	<b>349</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>354</b>
Appendix 1 –Cited Articles in Sections from Human Rights Treaties.....	355
A. <i>The Universal Declaration of Human Rights</i> .....	355
B. <i>The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights</i> .....	356
C. <i>The Convention of the Rights of the Child</i> .....	357
Appendix 2 – The 12 Objectives of the State.....	359
Appendix 3 – Myanmar Child Law .....	360

Appendix 4– Question Guide Example from World Vision Myanmar Street  
Children Participatory Evaluations..... 382

**REFERENCES ..... 383**

# List of Figures

---

Figure 1	Arnstein's ladder of participation.....	39
Figure 2	Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation.....	61
Figure 3	Shier's Pathways to Participation Model.....	63
Figure 4	Abrioux's spherical model of participation.....	65
Figure 5	Quality of Life Framework by Thomas and Hocking.....	82
Figure 6	Structure of Children's Clubs in Nepal.....	90
Figure 7	The 3 National Causes of the Union of Myanmar.....	107
Figure 8	Survey data on birth registration from the Department of Health Planning.....	112
Figure 9	Novice Life Lines.....	156
Figure 10	A day in the life of Phaung Daw Oo Yangon Novices.....	158
Figure 11	Activities of Teenage Children in Hlaingtharyar.....	206
Figure 12	Examples of Child's Working Day.....	208
Figure 13	Tin Ma Myint's story of her trip from Mandalay to Rangoon.....	214
Figure 14	Activities in the LPK Centre.....	264
Figure 15	Questions addressed by World Vision Myanmar street children's participatory evaluation process.....	271
Figure 16	Participants at the first meeting of the Child Focused Network.....	284
Figure 17	Suggested structure of the CFN according to project design.....	289
Figure 18	Structure of Phaung Daw Oo.....	298
Figure 19	World Vision Myanmar Organisational Structure.....	307
Figure 20	A multi-dimensional framework for children's participation.....	319
Figure 21	Participation Framework showing some examples.....	328

## List of Tables

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Table 1 - Summary of data collection processes .....	22
Table 2 - Barbara Franklin's model of participation .....	62
Table 3 – Local NGOs in Yangon and their area of focus (International Non-Government Organisations Working in Myanmar, 2004).....	117
Table 4 - Claimed Annual GDP Growth Rates 1994-2004 .....	200
Table 5 - World Vision Myanmar Household Data of Ward 12 Hlaingtharyar Township.....	202
Table 6 - Common Forms of Employment and Daily Income, Ward 12 Hlaingtharyar (extracted from World Vision Myanmar Project Records).....	203
Table 7 - Estimation of School Attendance in Hlaingtharyar Ward 12 .....	203
Table 8 - Type of work conducted by street children residents of the World Vision Myanmar LPK centre 1999.....	254
Table 9 - Typology of Street Children used by World Vision Myanmar.....	262
Table 10 - Types of participation according to a sample of staff at the LPK drop-in-centre .....	282
Table 11 - Identification of children's needs by adult and child participants of the CFN.....	285

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The data in this thesis reflects the lived experience of many adults and children in Burma, where I have spent much of the past fourteen years. There are many Burmese friends to whom I owe a great deal, both for their contribution to the data that I collected, as well as their friendship and inspiration. They are too numerous to mention; however, I would particularly like to acknowledge the support of Nilar Myaing, Khin Win, Myint Su, U Nayaka and Khin May Aye who have been there from the beginning, always willing to lend a helping hand or word of advice. The stories of the people of Burma (both children and adults) that I have tried to capture here reflect lives that have touched me in some way. They are stories that have been shared from the heart. They have showed me a side of Burma to which I would otherwise not have been privy. They are humbling stories of courage and resilience and it is to those children most of all that this thesis is dedicated. I do hope that in more favourable political conditions I can release this piece of work and that it might serve to bring about positive change in the lives of Burmese children.

My special thanks to Sue, Sam and Gabriel, who have never been demanding of my attention and have given me time to work and space to think and reflect. Their love and encouragement has made the difference so many times, when I wondered whether or not this was all worthwhile. Finally, my mother, now 85 years old and my father who, at the age of 93 has hung on to see me through; we are all children of someone and I have been so fortunate to be one of theirs!

## Acronyms

ADP	Area Development Program
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
CAP	Children as Partners Network
CEDC	Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances
CFN	Child Focussed Network
CNSP	Children in Need of Special Protection
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DFID	Department for International Development (British Government)
GONGO	Government Organised Non Government Organisation
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
INGO	International Non Government Organisation
LPK	<i>Lan Paw Kale</i> - Street Children
NGO	Non Government Organisation
NRC	National Registration Card
PDO	Phaung Daw Oo Monastic Education High School
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SK	Sangguniang Kabataan (Youth Councils in the Philippines)
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SWOC	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Constraints
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNGASS	United Nations General Assembly Special Session
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USDA	Union Solidarity Development Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

## Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

I, Karl Goodwin-Dorning, declare that the PhD thesis entitled Children as Beneficiaries and Participants in Development Programs: A Case Study in Burma (Myanmar) is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

Date APRIL 2008

# Preface

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The focus of this work is children, and more particularly children in Burma<sup>1</sup>, where I lived and worked for more than eight years. Children are an emotive subject. We have all been children and many of us will have children of our own at some stage. We watch them grow and, whether they are our own or someone else's, we have opinions as to how we think they should be brought up. It is perhaps stating the obvious but sometimes we (as adults) forget that, ultimately, we would not be here had we not once been children ourselves. From that time in our lives, no matter what age we reach, the events and memories of our childhood both consciously and subconsciously have an impact on who we are today and what we will become.

I must here admit to a personal bias. Some years ago, when my Burmese language was quite limited, a Burmese colleague and I conducted some informal research into an area in Bangkok where he had informed me that there were a number of Burmese children who had been trafficked from the border, in order to beg on the streets. As our organisation at that time had a number of programs for (illegal) migrant populations in Thailand, we decided to discover what we could about the situation of these children. We uncovered stories, often of heartbreak, but of enduring fascination.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document the term 'Burma' is used, not 'Myanmar' as the country has become known today. This is out of respect to the people of the country who voted unanimously for a democratic government in 1990. Their democratic and constitutional choice was violently over-ruled by the present military regime (previously the State Law and Order Restoration Council – SLORC) now known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) who seized and maintain their grip on power at the time of writing. In a bid to create a new nation in their own image, the country was, with questionable legitimacy, renamed Myanmar by the SLORC in direct contravention to practices of democratic principles and good governance. The one exception is when Myanmar is used to refer to the name of a specific organisation that uses Myanmar, such as World Vision Myanmar or UNICEF Myanmar.

I summarised this experience in September 1999 in a report to my supervisor. I have reproduced it here as I believe, as Gittens (1998) espouses, that any research into children must be predicated on an understanding of what we, as researchers, bring to the analysis. We see children and childhood through the lens of our own experience of being children, as well as through the filtering disciplines of social science, psychology and history that we have learned or absorbed or have inculcated in later stages of life.

So here then is my story of Burmese street children in Bangkok:

*Of late I have decided for numerous reasons not to stay in the usual hotel in Bangkok. Rather I have taken myself to the backpacker's area of Banglampoo – far more interesting than Sukhumvit as those of you who know the city I am sure will agree. One can sit in a sidewalk café or bar and watch life in all its complexity and variety pass by. You come to recognise the faces, watch the comings and goings, enter a different, quite unusual world. Part of this world that you discover is a group of street kids. You know this because of the fact that they have no shoes and wear ragged clothes; because you are a development worker and you have seen these things before. They traverse Khaosan Road and the numerous lanes and alleys surrounding it. They sell tissues. 10 Baht. You see them most nights, there are not that many so you can, if you wish, come to recognise them. You realise with your limited grasp of Thai that these children are not Thai at all. They are Burmese. So one night, if you speak a few phrases of Burmese which is about all I can, you speak to them and they smile, they are astonished, they gather around and chatter at a velocity that renders you completely devoid of comprehension. But you realise that this is not important, that*

*what matters is that someone has made an effort to communicate with them in a way that they have not experienced for God knows how long.*

*If you spend the time you can learn their names and their ages and how much they earn in a night. And then you realise that your grasp of Burmese is all too limited. So, if you are like me and have Burmese colleagues, you ask one to come and talk with these children of the street and you learn so much more. That they have come from Mawlamyaing and that they are Muslim. That they are frequently arrested, sent to the reception centre for illegal migrants, released and return. That their parents are either dead or at the border or begging in some other part of Bangkok. That they are proud because they can earn to support their families. You learn that they are streetwise. That they have potential to develop great intelligence. You learn all this and much more. You are gradually invited into a different reality to your own and you begin to understand because of your own reality, because you have a grasp of time and politics, that the world in which these children live is profoundly complex. Much more so than they realise.*

*Then on one trip you notice Charlie. He is one of 'them'. But this time he is different than before. He no longer carries his bag of tissues. Now he sells something else. You know this because he tells you. Not in words, because these are words that one has yet to learn in Burmese. But children do not always need words to communicate things of the heart. You have read about many children like this before. If you are like me you will have worked with similar children in another life. But this time, reality has taken a different face and you realise, suddenly, that you are the one person who understands that Charlie is sinking, letting go, spiralling down into despair, onto the borderline. You realise that because you live where you do and understand the profound and complex nature of things. At the same time you are left with your*

*own growing sense of despair because of this understanding. You look into his eyes and know that you will never be able to look into the eyes of your own children in quite the same way again. You begin to question all of those values and the high purpose that you have prided yourself on. You think of all the projects that you have designed and all the money that you have managed to procure and all the reports you have written and the words that you have spoken. You think of all of this and you realise now, at this moment, in this child's life, that they make not the slightest difference at all. That they never will.*

*You try to rationalise these understandings because otherwise what is an intellect for? You tell yourself that there are many Charlies in the world; that there always will be. You realise that anger and despair, even love are, perhaps, wasted emotions. Because they will not help. You know these things because you understand the profound and complex nature of life. Because time and circumstance have allowed you to grow up in another world.*

*With all of these realisations, you walk past the UNICEF office very close to Khaosan Road. You cannot help but think of the great irony that this presents. You catch the bus to the airport, from one reality you move to the next. You wonder if, when next you return, Charlie will still be there and if he is what you will say, what you can do. You realise that you do not know. You struggle with your thoughts, your emotions. You dig deep. Into your mind, into your soul. To find some reason to hope.*

As a postscript to this story, I have no idea what happened to Charlie. Not long after writing this Charlie and a number of his friends were arrested and sent to a refugee camp on the Thai border. While some of his friends returned to Bangkok, Charlie, as far as I could ascertain, never did. Charlie's story raised numerous

issues that I found difficult to reconcile. I spent much time pondering why his childhood was so different to my own and to that of my children. This, in turn, raised questions about the way in which I had been conditioned to believe that the experience of growing up was a predictable, clearly staged, and universal process. Charlie's life experiences clashed directly with these strongly embedded assumptions that I had about childhood, and made me question, in the first instance, why his life could not be different but then, upon further reflection, whether or not my own assumptions about what childhood should and should not entail might be flawed. Most significantly, I came to see that no matter what I thought, that Charlie was essentially a powerless, insignificant being, caught up in a series of political and social events over which he had no control and that everything he did and said was prefaced by his own need to survive.

Following this experience I decided that I might try to do something that would hopefully have an impact on the 'Charlies' of Burma. After all, I had the position and the ability to do so. As a result, I have been responsible for establishing programs for children working and living on the streets of Rangoon and Mandalay, for developing initiatives to address the needs of children both infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, and for setting up programs of non-formal education for children who are unable to attend school, and more. When I look back on all of this I suppose that I have achieved something although there always seems so much more to do – that is the nature of this kind of work. Burma has left an indelible mark on me. My wife and I brought up our own two children there. I have come to terms with many of the complexities of life there and sometimes I even think I have an understanding (limited as it is) of why things in Burma are the way

they are. I have worked with a rich diversity of people in Burma – both old and young – who have shown me what commitment is, through tireless hours of work for disadvantaged and marginalized children (with little or no recompense) who have an undying belief in their potential and capacity. I am humbled by their lives and the example they have set.

Finally, I have come into contact with the lives of hundreds of children through programs that I have worked on in Burma and I am in constant awe of the ability of human nature, in such young lives, to triumph over all forms of adversity. Try as I might I am not, therefore, an objective bystander and, as Gittens argues, and I believe, it is important to recognise that:

*If we try to understand 'the child' without acknowledging the centrality of our own experiences we stand in danger of making one-sided judgements and taking one-dimensional actions that deny a vital aspect of the meaning of 'the child' and 'childhood' in human culture (Gittens, 1998).*

This thesis is, therefore, simultaneously the reflection of a personal journey, based on my experience as an adult looking into the world of particular groups of children, as well as a scholarly attempt to understand how children might best be afforded the opportunity to productively and respectfully take part in the world around them.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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### *Focus of the Study*

Children's participation has gained much attention in the 'development discourse' in recent years. Now, more than ten years after the almost unanimous acceptance and ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>2</sup> (of which the notion of participation is a crucial component), an examination of what participation really means for children is timely.

This study examines the dynamics and processes of community development programs for children in Burma. It provides an analysis of the ethical dimensions of children's participation and it critiques the extent of participation of young people in community development activity. The thesis also explores the barriers and avenues for increased participation and presents recommendations based on lived experience which can be used to formulate policies that will enable or encourage greater participation. An interdisciplinary approach, including ethnography, development theory, and policy analysis, is used in this work to address a complex problem, and a new paradigm for the analysis of children's participation in development is presented.

The thesis contends that rights-based approaches, particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child, while providing a useful legal framework and commonly

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<sup>2</sup> Only two countries, The United States of America and Somalia have not ratified the Convention.

acknowledged basis for defining what should and should not be expected of children, have limitations. It argues that the newly defined sociology of children, that in many ways complements rights-based understandings of childhood, also has its limitations, but makes major advances in allowing children the social, emotional and political space and recognition to be seen as fully human. A contribution to knowledge will be made through analysis of childhood, of children's participation and of participatory practices of non-government development organisations in the Burmese context, using Burmese case studies and empirical data. This will also add to the limited body of knowledge about childhood in Burma, about which there are few contemporary comprehensive studies.

### *Children's participation – a complex issue*

Children's participation has received a great amount of attention in recent times. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) global report for the year 2003 has participation of children as its primary theme. In the Foreword to this report, the then Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, extols the virtues of children's participation. He commends the role that children and young people played in the May 2002 UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, the first of such assemblies in which children had played a part:

*The children's presence transformed the atmosphere of the United Nations. Into our usually measured and diplomatic discussions, they introduced their passions, questions, fears, challenges, enthusiasm and optimism. They brought us their ideas, hopes and dreams. They gave life to the values of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (UNICEF, 2003b)*

Yet it is easy to be swept up in the euphoria of an event such as the Special Session (which I attended and I was affected in exactly that way), and not really reflect on the inherent complexities of this apparently straightforward concept.

An understanding of participation requires firstly that the term is contextualised within the community development discourse. This enables an appreciation of its theoretical roots and provides a framework for the more complex task of understanding participation as it relates to children. Participation is associated with other equally nuanced terms such as 'empowerment', 'people centred', and 'democratic' and each of these terms need to be deconstructed. However, as will become clear, it is not sufficient to look at this notion strictly within the discipline of community development or even more broadly within the social sciences.

What makes the participation of children such a challenging concept is the idea (or perhaps ideal would be a better word) of childhood that we, as adults in the West particularly, have grown accustomed to, arguably conditioned, into accepting. For when children are seen as participants, the following questions are posed: Should children vote? Should children be allowed to choose where, or even if, they go to school? Should children be able to work? Should they be able to take part in sexual activity, and if so, at what age? While commonly (adult) accepted boundaries of what is and is not appropriate for different aged people in different societies are either defined in law or through culture, these standards and values are being increasingly challenged in many different contexts around the globe. On the negative side there has been the discovery of the widespread sexual abuse of children in some of the most respected of societal institutions (the church for

example) and on the positive side there is the increasing influence of human rights treaties, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

And so it is not sufficient to look at participation only from the perspective of community development, for it is obvious that we cannot treat children in the same way in which adults are treated. When delineating boundaries around childhood experience, philosophical questioning and ethical dilemmas are inevitable. For example, why should participation in the form of having a personal voice for a child be more important than deep-rooted cultural norms of respect and reverence and obedience to the voice of an elder as might be argued from an 'Asian Values' perspective? (Fukuyama, 1998, Vo Van Ai, 2000).

In the past child psychologists such as Piaget (1950) have shown that children go through a number of clearly distinct stages of development and that these are universal and unconditional prerequisites for our modern understanding of 'normal children'. Such claims of universality are, however, being questioned (James and Prout, 1997), and, increasingly, childhood is coming to be seen as a construct of time and culture. Some scholars, notably Philippe Aries (1960), have claimed that prior to the industrial revolution there was no concept of childhood at all. It is argued in this thesis that children's lives and the expectations placed on them by society are different in every culture and vary again within cultures and that imposed notions of a 'universal' childhood risk undervaluing and even, in some circumstances, endangering children. The growing realisation that psychology, culture, nature and nurture are all key elements in the development of the child encourages us to reconsider the way in which society places expectations and

boundaries around, not only what is and is not acceptable for a child to do or to be, but also around the way in which we understand the concept of childhood itself.

Regardless of the close relationship that may exist between a child and his or her parents and siblings, a child does not exist only within a family or a community. Expectations and understandings of children and childhood are also shaped by, and help to shape, broader societal factors, such as politics and economics. Such factors must be brought into any analysis of children and childhood in the modern day. Indeed, they are of particular interest in this age of rapid globalisation where children have been thrust onto the international arena as instigators of change, as was the case during the UN Special Session. They have also been the subjects of other people's actions as in, for example, the tragic case of the use of hundreds of children as hostages in a school in Beslan in North Ossetia, Russia in September 2004, where children were used to further political gain.

Despite the increasing role (both self initiated and through factors beyond their control) that children are playing within their own families and communities, even internationally, there is a lack of recognition of children as social actors in their own right. Recent years have seen an increasing number of writers (Bissell, 2003, Boyden et al., 1998, Gittens, 1998, Chawla, 2001, Lansdown, 2004, James and Prout, 1997) advocating for children to be given greater status according to their role in society, and to allow for children's voices to be heard not simply as an expression of their parents or within societal institutions set up specifically for them (schools for example). Rather, they argue that children should be recognised as deserving of attention as individuals with their own social standing and influence,

independent bearers of rights and responsibilities; they warrant being listened to and not being treated simply as 'adults in the making', or minds and bodies that will be but are not yet worthy of attention.

Since the evolution of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as the major international human rights treaty regarding children, the participation of children has, therefore, become a key theme of many international development agencies. However, the different dimensions of children's participation and what constitutes an effective and culturally relevant framework to engender, support and analyse children's participation within the discourse of community development theory and practice remains unclear. This thesis will address these issues, through critical analysis of the nature of children as beneficiaries and participants in development programs in Burma.

## *Methodology*

This research topic very quickly lends itself to philosophical discussion about the nature of childhood. It is necessary to understand the numerous ethical dilemmas that relate to how we, as individuals, as members of a family, a community, a country, an international global society, decide what is and what is not appropriate for children to do, to have, to see, to experience, to believe, to be. Quantitative data collection and analysis, therefore, is not necessarily the most appropriate tool. More relevant are the tools of qualitative social research, itself deeply embedded in philosophical probing, which can provide an important means of empirical data collection. Hughes (1990) points out this relationship and suggests that philosophical issues cannot be solved by citing evidence, as it is too hard to prove

established fact; that what is needed is a clear argument that shows systematically how a conclusion has been reached. The case in point, children's participation, may at the outset seem to be a simple question, but it is not. Children might participate according to their parents' wishes. Children might participate according to the cultural norms of any given society. From an individual perspective, children might participate according to their intellectual capacity. From a legal perspective, children might participate according to the statutes laid down in the law. Alternatively, children might participate according to their physiological and psychological development.

For each perspective however, the question is raised, 'Who decides what kind of participation is appropriate; and why, and how in fact will we know that *this* is participation and *that* is not?' At a more fundamental level, 'What is a child and how does society come to define childhood and why does one society construct and view children in one way and another society in another?' These are all vital questions that cannot be addressed through a strictly quantitative research framework. Indeed, as Hughes (1990) suggests, there are two fundamental questions in looking at philosophical issues. The first is an epistemological one, which relates to understanding: 'What is the character of our knowledge of the world?' The second is an ontological one that asks, 'What kinds of things are there in the world?'

In seeking to discover more about the nature of participation and children, this study has, therefore, drawn on social research methods that allow for people of different ages in Burma to tell their stories; to narrate their lived experience of the

world at different stages of their lives. Narrative research within the social sciences defies singularity of approach but as a means of data collection, the mere act of telling stories values the life and experience of the story teller and can be seen as a form of involvement or participation:

*Stories do things: they produce realities. Narrative research is therefore about the constitutive power of stories in producing realities and indeed the subject (Tamboukou, 2006).*

While some of the data that was collected can be 'quantified', to a degree, much of it was narrative and reflective of the rich tapestry of life and experience in Burma today. These data, these narratives, will be used to illuminate understandings of the broader philosophical debates around children, childhood and participation, not to reach any definitive answer to the question, 'What is a child and how should children participate'. Rather they will be used to ensure that as many different discourses are being brought to bear, particularly at a global level; that sufficient time is given to understanding the debates; and that certain discourses are not, without clearly established reasons, allowed precedence over others.

Empirical data collection, therefore, had the primary function of broadening the view of participation and illuminating considerations for the development of a new model for the analysis of participation, not of proving a hypothesis. A secondary function of the research was to contribute to contemporary understandings about Burmese children and their lived experience. For those reasons the research methodology primarily involved qualitative data collection techniques, including semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, direct observations and review of secondary data sources.

Three kinds of informant were interviewed in the course of the study: (1) key informants about Burmese cultural understandings of children, childhood, and child socialization, (2) staff of community development programs operating in Burma that target children as beneficiaries, and (3) children who are beneficiaries of these community development programs. Secondary data was used to provide background to both research subjects and community development programs. Data collection (including fieldwork preparation) took place between October 2001 and December 2002.

### *Location and Composition of Informants*

The study was conducted in Burma's capital city, Rangoon (Yangon) and involved approximately eight months of data collection. Rangoon has a population of five million people and most of these people come from the Bamar ethnic majority. Burma has over 135 ethnic groups. In order to define what is 'Burmese culture' and what are the Burmese understandings of 'childhood' and other related terms, key informants were selected from the majority ethnic group, the Bamars. This group was selected as it is the majority group and is the only major group to which the researcher had (relatively) easy access.

### *Key Informants*

Key informants about contemporary Burmese cultures and beliefs were selected according to competency testing (Bernard, 1988). Generally they were older Burmese people. The study attempted to have stratified sampling<sup>3</sup> and to include an equal proportion of men and women, boys and girls. One of the criteria

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<sup>3</sup> Defined by the Penguin Dictionary of Psychology (Reber, 1996) as sampling in which the population as a whole is separated into distinct parts (or 'strata') and each is drawn from separately.

ascertained by competency testing requirements was that informants were either parents, or cultural guardians of knowledge about children, such as Buddhist monks and nuns. Until the annexation of Upper Burma by the British in 1885, Theravada Buddhist monks ran the education system and they continue to hold great moral authority today as guardians of Burmese children and authorities on appropriate forms of childhood behaviour and discipline (Khine, 1945). Data was collected in the form of both semi-structured interviews (to gain personalistic and individual experiences and beliefs) as well as small focus group discussions, designed to elaborate more instrumental beliefs about children, childhood and child socialization in Burma. Unstructured interviews with key informants served to indicate the type of questions that should be asked in more structured interviews (as discussed in Werner and Schoepfle, 1987).

Three groups of key informants were selected: Mothers/Fathers (aged 60 yrs and older from the ethnic Burma Buddhist minority); Teachers (government primary schools); and Monks (who run monastic schools). These groups were chosen as in Burmese society authority has traditionally emanated from elders, kings, teachers and monks. Traditionally, they have been responsible for the socialization of children. Ten of each of these informants were interviewed using a semi-structured format. A maximum of thirty interviews represented a feasible number within the fieldwork period, while providing a diversity of views. As the study is qualitative and deals with issues of meaning, the sample size is not designed to be statistically representative. This qualitative approach is common within the social sciences when collecting subjective data concerning issues of meaning (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

### *Community Development Workers*

To gather data about children's participation within the community development arena, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with project officers of development projects in Burma. They included staff from five child focussed agencies: three international (World Vision Myanmar, UNICEF Myanmar, Save the Children); and two local (The Child Focussed Network and Phaung Daw Oo Monastic Education School). All are presently working with children in their programming. Interviews sought to elicit information from different levels of project implementation: policy, management and community at a 1:1:3 ratio (i.e. a total of five people from each organisation – twenty-five in all). This represents the diversity of organisations that work with children and the different levels at which they work. The ratio allowed for a diversity of views and maximized the data that could be gathered in the implementation of the programs, as well as policy and management. The sample size was constrained by the small number of development projects focusing on children in Burma.

### *Burmese Children*

While using focus groups discussion and semi-structured interviews, as with the data collection with adult respondents, a focus upon Burmese children also involved observation of children participating in community development programs, in order to ascertain any discrepancies between the theory and practical implementation of programs targeting and involving children. Observation consisted of at least five visits to each project (for a period of a day per visit) to observe children in their day-to-day activities. These observations were recorded

through the keeping of detailed field notes. Children taking part in focus groups were identified from amongst the development projects being implemented by the organisations mentioned above.

Data collection with children was constrained by the limited number of child focussed organisations, both international and national, working in the Rangoon area and, therefore, focussed on one international and two national organisations. Stratified sampling was used for the selection of children. Input was gathered from children in two age groups: children eight to ten years old and young adolescents aged thirteen to sixteen. These two age groups represent periods of significant transition for children and therefore provide an opportunity to observe the differential interplay between family and community, for children at different developmental levels. From a practical standpoint, children under eight would find it difficult to articulate meaningful responses to the questions being posed and children older than sixteen may have already transitioned into adult responsibilities. However, in addition one focus group was conducted with a group of older seventeen year old children who were university students and who came from privileged families. They were involved as volunteers in one of the programs. While not representing the full developmental continuum, the strategy generated samples of two different age cohorts, providing the ability to draw more reliable profiles of the daily reality and major issues of concern to children across developmental levels. Children's care-givers were invited to attend the focus groups with their children and a female interpreter was also present at all focus groups and during semi-structured interviews.

## *Participatory Activities*

In keeping with the subject of the thesis, a number of participatory data collection activities were conducted with children. These were based on Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) activities, commonly used in the development industry. They consisted of the following:

### 1. The clock

In this activity, children were asked to fill in two 24-hour clocks – one for weekdays and one for a Sunday. This was to ascertain what activities children undertook on a typical day. Following up from this activity was a discussion with children on what they like/dislike about their day and why. Through the clock diagrams and the subsequent discussion it was possible to focus on some of the issues which are of particular interest, such as the type and amount of work a child does on any given day.

### 2. Lifelines

Lifelines were drawn on a large sheet of paper, recording the child's life from birth to the present. On it the children were asked to mark the highs and lows of their lives and then to tell the group why they had chosen those particular moments in their lives.

### 3. Family Diagrams

In this activity children were asked to draw pictures of their families and to mark on them the relationships between family members. Different things were then marked on the diagram, to allow some understanding of the relationships. For example, the children were asked to mark who they felt they were particularly close to and then to explain their relationship with that person. Follow up prompts such

as: how do they think people react when no one loves them; what sorts of things do they talk about with each member of the family; what sort of decisions do they make within that relationship; what happens if they disagree with a parent, sibling or member of the extended family and how are difficulties resolved, were used to elicit further information relating to the diagrams.

#### 4. Neighbourhood Mapping

Participants were asked to think about where they live, work and play and to draw their neighbourhood. They are then asked to mark in major landmarks, places that are friendly and unfriendly, places where they spend a lot of time, places that are important for them, places that they are scared of. Discussion follows on why particular places were chosen and others were not.

#### 5. Venn diagram of people and relationships

Children were asked to cut circles, representing people that they come into contact with; the larger the circle, the more important that person. Circles were arranged to show relationships between these individuals.

#### 6. Causal diagram

Causal diagrams or impact diagrams are useful to find out the inter-links between events and they can also be used for working backwards, to find out the cause of a problem or situation. In this case, causal diagrams were constructed to find out why children are on the street in the first place.

#### 7. Profile of a child's work/school day

This exercise was carried out to identify the child's role in the family and community and to give some idea of the child's input into the economic situation of the family. In Burma, going to school is generally seen as a child's duty (and work).

All of these techniques were used in the course of data collection however, while some are presented in the text of the thesis, others are used to assist in the construction of narrative around the lives of key informants.

Focus group discussions and key informant interviews held with both adult and child informants were semi structured in nature. For children, they focussed on discussion around the particular activity, such as the life lines, in order to fill out the sometimes limited data recorded by the child in pictorial form. For adult informants interview and focus group guidelines were developed and focussed on the following broad themes:

1. How childhood defined in Myanmar
2. Memories of childhood
3. Well-known proverbs, expressions and sayings related to children and childhood
4. What Myanmar cultures tell us about children relating to the following:
  - Discipline practices
  - Initiation into adult life
  - Kind and appropriateness of work (paid and non paid)
    - Tea shop boys, domestic workers etc
    - Work done in the family
    - Looking after younger siblings
  - Gender differences
  - Religion
  - Education

- Social relationships amongst each other, parents, siblings, extended family, wider community (teachers, monks, community leaders etc)
  - Involvement of children in the decision making processes of:
    - The family
    - The community
    - School
5. Kinds of responsibilities/obligations children have in the family for:
    - Themselves
    - Siblings
    - Parents
    - Other family members
    - Religious authorities
    - Civil authorities
    - Teachers
  6. Sorts of decisions children make and when (what age / maturity level):

- About themselves relating to:
  - Education
  - Work
  - Involvement in family activity
  - Social obligations
  - Day to day activities
  - Treatment of younger siblings
  - Peer and social relationships
  - Religious practices and responsibilities
  - Living circumstances
  - Marriage
- About their younger siblings relating to:
  - Discipline
  - Education
  - Work

- Day to day activities
  - About their parents
  - About others?
7. Understandings and examples of participation and the cultural “potential” for increased participation
  8. For development workers
    - Kinds of projects they are involved in
    - Children’s involvement in these projects if any – why/why not?
    - Reaction from other members of the community to this involvement
    - Reaction of children to their own involvement
    - Results and impact of this participation

A summary of data collection processes used for the thesis appears in the table below:

Participants		Data Collection Method				
Type	No.	Key informant interviews/ narrative collection	Focus Group Discussions	Participatory Activities	Document Review	Observations
Children	50	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Adult community members (Parents)	30	✓	✓	✓		
Development organisations staff	16	✓	✓			
Community leaders	10	✓				

Table 1 - Summary of data collection processes

### Data Analysis

Data from focus group and interviews were transcribed and coded using Atlas Ti and Microsoft Excel computer software. This enabled the generation of specific themes which are articulated in the discussion sections of Chapters 4 and 5. Participative activities elicited numerous pictorial information however it was often

in the discussions held with respondents around the activity that more 'data rich' information was gathered. Discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed in a similar fashion using Atlas Ti and Excel.

### *Ethics*

All data collection activities were conducted in accordance with the approval given by the Ethics Committee of Victoria University. Participation was strictly on a volunteer, confidential and anonymous basis and participants were able to stop interview proceedings at any time. Children were always interviewed in the presence of other adults, where possible a parent or legal guardian. Fictitious names have been used unless express consent was given for real names to be used and photographs have only been used with permission. Photos have been included for the purpose of examination of the thesis only, to provide examiners with a visual snapshot of the associated written narrative. They will be removed prior to final binding of the thesis. Even though much of the information in this thesis is of a general nature, certain parts of it are sensitive and may compromise the work of the organisations discussed, should this information be available in the public arena. Simply providing fictitious names for the organisations would have little bearing, as there are so few organisations working with children in the way described, that it would be a simple task to identify their real names. Therefore, I have used the correct names of organisations but, as with photographs, these names will be changed prior to final binding. In addition, should some of this material enter the public arena, I would no longer be able to enter Burma and this, in turn, would affect my own livelihood and the ability to continue the work that I have started in the country which I believe adds to the quality of life of a broad range of people (including myself). Most importantly, much of the data was

collected from people with whom I had, and in some cases still have, relationships of trust that I do not wish to compromise. I have, therefore, requested that, if accepted, the thesis remains embargoed in the restricted area of the university library, and will be only available for viewing after the permission of the author and supervisor is given in writing.

## *Overview of thesis structure*

Chapter Two of this thesis reviews the literature that represents the multi-disciplinary nature of participation. It begins with a discussion of the meaning of participation and related concepts from the community development perspective. It will be shown that participation is a complex concept, made even more so by the variable of age; acknowledging that 'children' cannot be treated in the same way as 'adults'. Links will be made with feminist theories, as it will be argued that there are many similarities around issues of discrimination against women and generational discrimination. Drawing on community development theory and examples from development projects in the third world<sup>4</sup>, as well as literature more representative of Western democracies, participation and the debates about the 'right to participate' will be shown to be a fundamental notion of democracy and civil society.

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<sup>4</sup> It is acknowledged that there is much debate as to the use of the term "Third World" and similar terms. These are used recognising their limitations: that they imply a linear track that all countries are on, when some are deteriorating, others are stagnating; that they lump very different settings, for example China and Sierra Leone, into one basket; and that they have an embedded 'western' concept of what is 'developed' which can be seen as derogatory. However, alternatives are little better, for example, "Two-thirds world" or "majority world" often need explanation and do not describe the real problem; "resource poor settings" does this better, and is used more often – however it's mainly poverty of economic resources being referred to, because many "resource-poor settings" are rich in human, cultural, environmental or natural resources; "economic resource-constrained settings" is clumsy; "Low income countries" and "Least developed countries" are terms used by the World Bank, but have very specific criteria; other suggestions such as "the South" (a northern hemisphere suggestion) has problems when considering countries like Australia. I have, therefore, used these terms interchangeably acknowledging their inherent limitations but, at the same time, recognising the need for some distinction to be made between countries that are quantifiably more advantaged than others.

The second strand of literature to be reviewed in Chapter Two focuses on the human rights 'movement', particularly children's rights. This literature will be examined in order to provide insight into notions of participation in its legal sense, as well as to help further the understanding of commonly accepted rights and responsibilities of children. While it is obvious that not all countries (perhaps not any) fully adhere to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the fact that it has been signed and ratified by 193 countries could be said to be illustrative of commonly accepted norms and understandings of childhood, at least from a legalistic perspective.

Of greater relevance is the use that has been made of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by advocates both for and with children, as well as by child advocates themselves, in calling for the rights of children, including their right to participation, to be respected and translated into law. The human rights movement has been vital in the creation of opportunity for participation for marginalized communities, and in the reduction of discrimination against women. Human rights approaches can be controversial, and from some perspectives may not necessarily be seen as the most appropriate vehicle through which children and their contribution to society can be given the status that some would argue they deserve. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has four primary tenets: survival, development, protection and participation. It is the conflict that arises with the latter two (protection and participation), which is most contentious. To what extent should children be able to take control of their own lives before their safety and the need to protect them becomes more important? Who will fight this battle

for children's right to participate: adults advocating on children's behalf or will it be children themselves?

After reaching some consensus about understandings of participation or at least an understanding of the breadth and complexity of the term, a third strand of literature will be introduced: the growing body of knowledge that looks at children and childhood as a social construct. The implication of such thought is far-reaching; if all cultures do not see childhood in the same light, can there be any standardised regulation of childhood, in terms of age or ability or social acceptability of different activities? Can international treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child be applied to all cultures or is this simply an imposition of a Western ideal of childhood that would have all children in school, seen but not heard, busy preparing themselves for adulthood, not truly individuals until the arbitrary age of 18 is reached? These are but some of the challenges that the social constructionist agenda brings to understanding children's participation.

Together these three elements: community development; child rights; and the social construction of childhood, will help bring together a composite understanding of what it means to be a child within society today, and will help to reveal a more robust understanding of what it means for a child, any child, to participate. While the focus of the thesis will be, primarily, on developing countries, literature concerning both developed and developing countries will be used where relevant. This may serve to broaden the relevance and potential application of this research.

The third chapter of the study will look at Burma as a specific example or context in which children's participation can be examined more fully and in which the questions raised above can be reflected upon. For many years considered a pariah state by the rest of the world, Burma's history since the end of the Second World War has been marred by violence and oppression. A short-lived democratic period between 1948 and 1962 preceded the extended rule of General Ne Win and his 'road to socialism', which led to the country spiralling into economic decline, where it had once been known as 'the rice bowl of Asia'. When General Ne Win stepped down from public office in the late 1980's, a brief glimmer of hope for democratic advancement was seen with the appearance of Aung San Su Kyi (daughter of the father of modern Burma, General Aung San – assassinated in 1948 just prior to independence) and a rising student movement calling for reform. Resultant democratic elections saw Suu Kyi's party winning 82% of the seats (Falco, 2003) but it was denied government by the military still controlled by the retired Ne Win. At the time Suu Kyi was herself under house arrest and, to this day, she has only seen brief periods of freedom. Her party has been constantly harassed and has never able to take political leadership of the country.

A country with the history of Burma, one of the few remaining overtly military regimes in the world, may initially seem a strange choice in which to identify and study children's participation. An environment such as this does, in many respects, seem to preclude any notion of participation. Yet it is paradoxically in the face of the overt denial of participation that the true nature of the term can be fully illuminated. Firstly, by the analysis of the total lack of formal mechanisms of participation and the impact that has on a community (i.e. through looking at what

participation is by understanding what it is not). Secondly, it can be illuminated by examining the informal mechanisms of participation that spring up, almost as a form of 'social capital' (Putnam, 1993) upon which people have come to rely. That people in Burma have been able to survive, despite economic mismanagement, lack of political freedom, and poor government infrastructure, could well be due to the widespread social networks and social capital that have taken the place of more institutionalised systems of support.

Chapters Four and Five seek to understand the dynamics and process of community development programs in Burma, and the ways in which participation has and might continue to contribute to improved quality of life for children. The chapters have been divided for ease of analysis, although in many respects they should be seen as closely related. Chapter Four looks at participation from the individual's perspective. That is, how some children and relevant adult key informants on Burmese culture understand children, childhood and the ways in which children participate at a societal level. This will help clarify the contextual factors that influence the ability of children to participate within community development programs, the topic of Chapter Five. Data in Chapter Four suggests that these factors can broadly be divided into three areas: the personal; the socio-political; and the narrative, which refers to the way in which society embodies childhood and the implicit narratives that create this such as culture, religion, history. Analysis from the perspective of these different 'realms' enable us to uncover and in some cases 'deconstruct' the factors that influence childhood in Burma today, illuminating how the lived experience of Burmese children relates to understandings and nuances of participation in its broadest sense.

Chapter Five looks in detail at child-focussed development programs in Burma, operated by both international and local organisations. It will examine the manner in which children are able to participate (or not), and the way in which the 'realms of influence' (from Chapter Four) are taken into consideration in the planning, implementation and monitoring of child-focussed programs. Both chapters will have the secondary outcome of adding to the presently sparse body of knowledge of childhood in Burma.

Based on the theoretical discussion in Chapters Two and Three, and reflection on the empirical data of Chapters Four and Five, the possibility for a new framework for the analysis of children's participation emerges. This is part of the new contribution that this thesis makes in relation to children and development. The framework delineates the three interrelated realms that help describe the way in which society embodies childhood; the personal, socio-political and narrative, as described above. It also identifies a more nuanced way to look at participation programs for children being implemented through development organisations in Burma and more broadly within a community development context.

Chapter Seven summarises findings, examines some of the implications of the research for the organisations involved, as well as for policy and program in general, advances conclusions, updates relevant information about the situation in Burma and make recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 2

## Locating Participation

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### *Introduction*

This chapter provides an analysis of the key discourses related to the thesis: community development; the human rights movement and within that, child rights; and examines the growing body of knowledge around the sociology of childhood. Despite representing quite different disciplines of study, each discourse offers a vital perspective for this thesis. It is through these analyses and understanding of the areas of convergence and divergence that more definitive conclusions about children's participation become possible.

The first section of this chapter relates to community development and particularly to notions of participation and empowerment. What is clear from this analysis is that participation, while theoretically viable and arguably necessary, is influenced by power and hegemony, and that those who generally benefit from participating are often those who already have or control access to decision-making structures and systems within the community. Most often, this means men. Women are often unable to formally influence such processes, and children are seldom even considered. Indeed, it is clear from the analysis of mainstream community development literature that children are scarcely mentioned, other than in a welfare sense as beneficiaries of programs that aim to meet specific needs, such as health or education.

However, with the growth of the human rights movement, previously marginalised groups are finding a voice and are destabilising existing power imbalances. There has been a convergence of development thinking and rights-based approaches: good development has become synonymous with the notion that people must have a voice in their own development. This is now seen not simply as a good idea but as an inherent human right.

The child rights movement and its manifesto, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), have the potential to raise the status of children and to give them greater control over issues facing them. However the convention leaves many questions unanswered, particularly as it attempts to qualify children's participation by making it dependent on the age and maturity of the child (similar limitations are not placed on adults, many of whom have questionable maturity). A primary foundation of the convention is the 'best interests of the child' (article 3 of the CRC, UNICEF, 2003a); but who might determine these interests is often left open to debate and interpretation.

This chapter will discuss what might constitute 'authentic' participation of children within the child rights framework and will suggest that the convention can be seen to have roots in a particular understanding of the concept of childhood: a primarily Western vision of the ideal of innocence and purity. This idealisation of childhood is, by many accounts (Prout, 1996) a recent phenomenon, having evolved from the Age of Enlightenment and is not always wholly transferable across cultures.

This understanding of childhood, however, is being increasingly challenged as a result of new studies in the sociology of children (e.g. Wyness, 2001, Prout, 1996, Mulderij, 1996, Bissell, 2003, Woodhead, 1999, James and Prout, 1997). Literature in this field argues that children can no longer be seen as a silent minority but as entities endowed with their own ontological status and capable of acting on their own behalf. Such a perspective challenges the common acceptance of the current understanding of childhood development (such as Piaget, 1950, Vygotsky, 1962), and raises pertinent questions about the universal nature of childhood.

In drawing together these three complementary yet separate strands of literature: community development, human rights (including child rights) and the sociology of childhood, it is possible to draw more informed conclusions about the nature of participation for children.

## *Locating participation within the community development discourse*

*More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate, they are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people....I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realise their aspirations for a better life...what we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing...Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge (President H Truman 1949 cited in Escobar, 1995).*

Despite the good will espoused in President Truman's speech in 1949, after decades of post World War II development the great disparity between rich and poor remains. Indeed it may even be growing. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report of 1997 noted that despite clear gains in many areas of human development, 'a quarter of the world's people remain in severe poverty' (UNDP, 1997 p2). More recently, a report summarising urgent priorities for the new millennium, published by World Vision, noted that half of the world's population of six billion people lived on less than \$2 per day and that malnutrition was affecting the growth of four out of every ten children. The report remarked that more than 130 million children have no access to education and, of those who do, 150 million drop out of schooling before the fourth standard. It also cited evidence that contaminated water accounts for 80 percent of all disease that claims the lives of around 5 million children a year, and that more than 250 million

children around the world work so that their families can survive (World Vision International, 1999 p4).

Furthermore, on a global scale the emergence and re-emergence of infectious disease epidemics, such as HIV and tuberculosis, are having a devastating impact on many of the hard earned development gains of the past decades (Scalway, 2003). The increasing poverty of many countries, despite the huge investment in development, has caused some to question the value of the current development paradigm, as Escobar notes:

*For instead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression (Escobar, 1995 p3).*

Prominent authors (Korten and Klauss, 1984) have suggested that the 'failure' of the present development paradigm has been a direct result of sophisticated systems of control in the West that have imposed Western values and doctrine:

*The progress of the industrial era was guided by a powerful paradigm, a product largely of Western thought and experience, that shaped the dominant direction of societal development, dictated the goals to which policy attention was directed, and spawned sophisticated methodologies for guiding human choices...(Korten and Klauss, 1984 p5)*

Although some authors trace the causes for Western hegemony to events that took place well before the beginning of the twentieth century (Landes, 1999), it could be argued that this 'product of Western thought' referred to by Korten and Klauss

above, began in 1944. At this time the Bretton Woods Agreement triggered the development of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (The World Bank) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade – GATT (now transformed into the World Trade Organisation). The dominance of these organisations and the development policies (largely based on the beliefs encapsulated in Truman's speech above) has maintained the economic hegemony of the north over the south. Escobar (1995) argues that the development discourse, entrenched in violence and oppression, has been the central and most ubiquitous operator of the politics of representation and identity in much of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Where did things go wrong? Participation has become a rallying cry for development agencies over the past few decades. Many theorists, advocates and activists have suggested that the world as described by Escobar can only be changed through the participation of the oppressed in their own liberation. Paulo Freire (1970) is perhaps the best known of these:

*This then, is the great humanistic task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both (Freire, 1970 p 21).*

People's participatory movements have played a vital part in affecting all kinds of local, national and global policy change (Toh and Floresca-Cawagas, 1997). There have been movements against globalisation and World Bank structural adjustment policies by poor communities and their supporters. Women's

movements have identified and fought against the exploitation of women and children in sweatshops. Grass roots environmental and political movements have at different times created momentum for substantial change. As some have described this:

*Globalization from Below...has the potential to change the power equation. Rarely in human history have ordinary people had such an opportunity to transform the world for the better (Brecher et al., 2004).*

Over the years participation has been treated as a principle, an approach, an ideal, a philosophy. Participation has become an underlying premise on which democratic institutions have been built and is now recognised as a fundamental human right within many international human rights treaties.

As participation has grown in response to the failure of the post World War II development paradigm, so too have the number of definitions of this concept. The World Bank, for example, defines participation as:

*The process through which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policy-making, resource allocations and access to public goods and services (World Bank, 2003)*

Others include a particular focus on rural development

*With regard to rural development...participation includes people's involvement in decision-making processes, in implementing programmes, their sharing in the benefits of development programmes and their involvement in efforts to evaluate such programs (Cohen and Uphoff, 1977).*

Or the equitable distribution of resources to marginalised communities:

*Participation is concerned with... the organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social*

*situations on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control. (Pearse and Stifle 1979)*

Some see participation as a means through which those who might benefit from a programmatic intervention begin to claim influence over planning and implementation:

*Community participation is an active process by which beneficiary or client groups influence the direction and execution of a development project with a view to enhancing their well-being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance or other values they cherish. (Paul 1987)*

Some use descriptive terms that are themselves quite esoteric, such as 'empowerment':

*Participation can be seen as a process of empowerment of the deprived and excluded. This view is based on the recognition of differences in political and economic power among different social groups and classes. Participation in this sense necessitates the creation of organisations of the poor which are democratic, independent and self-reliant! (Ghai quoted in UNDP, 2003 p 18)*

Some relate participation to the creation of new bonds of understanding and shared purpose:

*Participatory development stands for the partnership which is built upon the basis of dialogue among the various actors, during which the agenda is jointly set, and local views and indigenous knowledge are deliberately sought and respected. This implies negotiation rather than the dominance of an externally set project agenda. Thus people become actors instead of being beneficiaries. (OECD 1994)*

There is, therefore, no single definition of participation, although within the development discourse it has become a rallying cry and held great hope for change. Campfens (1997), for example, locates participation within the

fundamental principles of community development, arguing that co-operative responsibility, participation, local capacity strengthening and the mobilisation of community resources are key tools in the reconstruction of society and are capable of addressing the inadequacies of the past development decades. In particular he notes that:

*Those who are marginalized, excluded or oppressed should be given the essential tools that will enable them to critically analyse and become conscious of their situation in structural terms, so they can envisage possibilities for change (Campfens, 1997 p24)*

Participation, therefore, has grown to prominence within the development discourse. Despite the diversity of definitions, most imply that participation is a process whereby participants take control over outcomes through a process of consensual decision-making that benefits the whole (as opposed to individuals within the group). Participation is, therefore, both a means to an end, as well as an end in itself. It can be seen as leading to the development of skills that facilitate consensus making and necessarily requires the opinions of all involved to be taken into account, resulting in an equitable sharing of resources and outcomes of any particular initiative.

### Empowerment

Integral to the participation process is something that has become known in development circles as 'empowerment'. This is a term which is used often but like 'participation', is packed with nuance and is often misunderstood. It can appear paternalistic and presumptive: as in, '*I empower you*'. However, its underlying notion is one of redistribution of power, rather than of one person acting to increase the 'power' of another. As early as the 1930s, some development projects

stressed empowerment and collective local action and by 1969, participation was being discussed in terms of its relationship with power. Sherry Arnstein (1969) identified this link, asserting that participation must lead to a redistribution of power, from those who have it, to those who do not. She developed a ladder of participation (see Figure 1), an idea used later by proponents of child participation, such as Hart (1997) and Franklin (Franklin, 1998). Arnstein argued that citizen participation in local governance was predominantly tokenistic and needed to change, enabling power imbalances to be addressed and disenfranchised citizens to be included in political and economic structures and processes.

The recent global interest in participation and empowerment has been traced to the 1970s, when the failure of many projects led to a need to

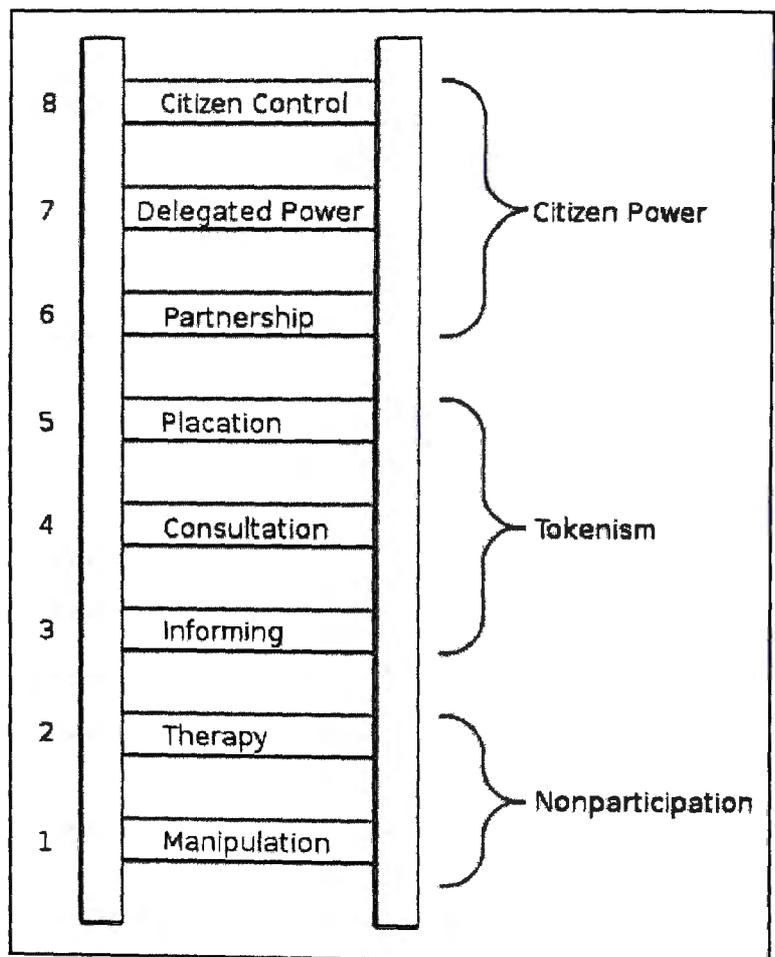


Figure 1 - Arnstein's ladder of participation

understand the perspective of local communities and brought into question the hegemony of the 'external expert' (Gujit and Shah, 1998). This realisation, combined with some earlier methodologies of social transformation (Freire, 1972), helped to provide basic principles to guide people's empowerment over their own development process. Empowerment, therefore, can be:

*...seen to varying degrees as a process which strengthens people's and organisations' political awareness, power analysis, critical consciousness, personal sense of worth and rights, analytical capacities and skills, and ability to participate in decision-making at all levels from family, to NGOs, to government (VeneKlasen et al., 2004 p 15)*

However, assuming that communities need and want to be 'empowered' or indeed presupposing that they are not 'empowered' already, might fail to take into account the way in which more traditional societies operate. As Tonnies (1957 first published 887) postulates, there are essentially two types of society, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* societies are those in which people interact with a small number of others who they know well and who take part in a variety of roles within society. In such a community, neighbours provide support to each other in times of need and everyone knows each other's business. Public and private are not separate, resulting in a far richer sense of community. Traditional societies fit more broadly within this category. *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, entails people interacting with a range of other individuals in different situations that are largely instrumental in nature (i.e. purpose, not relationship driven). There is a clear understanding of what constitutes legitimate dealings with others and the private and public are clearly defined. Taxes paid to the state pay for others (usually professionals) to fulfil the responsibility that the community might once have had. Ife (1995) argues that modern 'Western' societies fit within this category. It should be acknowledged, however, that all Western societies are not the same and rural communities within them may well be more *Gemeinschaft* in nature. Motivation for participation in each of these types of society will, however, be quite different.

Logically, the richness of community outlined in the *Gemeinschaft* model could possess far more potential for 'authentic' participation. Still, one must not look at traditional societies naively, assuming that everything within is perfect or homogeneous. Many traditional societies are ruled by laws that are often discriminatory (particularly towards women), sometimes extremely harsh, and are composed of complex systems of power that may not encourage participative decision-making of any sort. Some writers (for example Guijt and Shah, 1998) have cautioned that the failure to understand the complex nature of community, indeed the desire of proponents of participative development to hold on to some mythical ideal of community, could, ironically, be considered one of the major impediments to the participatory development movement.

Within the community development discourse Guijt and Shah (1998) note that a 'participation boom' took place in the 1980s. This saw an explosion of grassroots activists and local non-government organisations (NGOs), whose focus was on understanding and respecting insider knowledge. The early 90s saw, 'frenzied levels of global interest in participation' (Maguire, 1987 p4), with participation becoming a prerequisite for funding. We now find participation in today's development discourse being characterised by two growing paradoxes. The first is the trend to standardisation of approaches, which, in a sense, completely contradicts the notion of participation, whereby direction is moulded by the participants and is, therefore, difficult to standardise. The second paradox relates to the growth of a technical body of knowledge that takes the empowerment aspect of the participatory process out of the hands of communities and places it in the hands of the 'experts' once again (Maguire, 1987).

In the present day, as with many development terms and practices, the notion of participation has now grown to be complex and ambiguous. It can mean anything from consultation to full empowerment and has even been likened to a Trojan horse that can hide coercion and manipulation as its basic motivation (Slocum and Thomas-Slayter, 1995). Perhaps the greatest irony in the participation discourse is that traditional societies are often much more participatory in nature than Western societies but it has been western governments and development agencies, in a bid to find more sustainable solutions to development problems, that have encouraged the participation of beneficiaries of aid in their own development. Rather than understanding indigenous forms of participation, however, the development process that they often espouse is underpinned by Western forms of democracy. This assumes that the 'empowerment' of local communities to analyse their situation and problems, reach consensus over solutions and take collective action, is the best way for the development process to take place. The inherent risk of such assumptions suggests that a more thorough knowledge of the mechanisms within communities that result in cohesion and positive social outcomes is necessary.

### *Social Capital*

Since the 1980s 'social capital' has become increasingly influential in the context of development (Collier, 1998, Grootaert, 1998). Recent debate about social capital has resulted from a need to better understand the complexities of societies and the failure of economic models of development in transitional and developing

economies (Collier, 1998). Understanding social capital, therefore, also helps to further illuminate participation.

During the 1990s the introduction and failure of policies such as structural adjustment, led to a re-thinking of development theory and practice. Fukuyama (2002) suggests that development policies of the 1990s (known as the 'Washington consensus') that sought to reduce the control of the state in economic development failed due to a lack of understanding of culture and social capital.

Like many social science concepts, 'social capital' has a multitude of definitions and is interdisciplinary in nature. It is also a concept that is very difficult to measure in a quantitative sense. The term gained recognition primarily through the work of James Coleman (1988) and was given further impetus in the 1990s through the study of democratic institutions in Italy (Putnam, 1993). Bourdieu defines social capital as:

*The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to...membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital .(Bourdieu, 1986 p 243)*

Both Coleman and Bourdieu emphasise the 'capital' nature of the concept whereby individuals within social networks that are formed reap rewards that include economic benefit.

Others such as Putnam have defined social capital as 'trust, norms and networks that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1993 p 167), and stress its 'social' nature. Both the social and the economic bias in the definition of social capital requires that people co-operate and participate, not simply for their own

benefit but for the 'greater good' of those around them (Arnold, 2002). However, while claiming that the family is the cornerstone of social capital, neither Coleman, Bourdieu or Putnam detail the nature of family life that supports social capital (Winter, 2000). By inference, the role of children in social capital has been largely ignored.

Social capital theory brings relevant insights to understanding autocratic governments such as Burma, as well as the nature of participation. Fukuyama (2002) points out that good democracy equates to good economies, growth and technological change and that social capital is vital for good democracy. Although his observations fail to adequately account for the success of the real economic giant of the current era, China, on the whole, they appear to be true. Democratic liberalisation has been crucial to the successes of economies such as South Korea and Poland, whereas countries that have maintained autocratic or corrupt democracies, such as Indonesia and Russia, continue to struggle for real improvement in quality of life:

*Social capital is what permits individuals to back together to defend their interests and organise to support collective needs; authoritarian governance, on the other hand, thrives on social atomization (Fukuyama, 2002 p 26)*

According to Fukuyama, the result of authoritarian governance is to push social capital into familial and kinship networks. This has possibly been the case in Burma, where restrictions on formal networks or associations, apart from those under the auspices of the regime, are largely based on relationships of trust and based also upon family or immediate communities such as religious groups. Such action, however, can have negative long term ramifications, as it precludes trusting

those outside the network, thereby inhibiting economic growth. As Fukuyama points out:

*The single most difficult situation to deal with, from a policy standpoint, is a society thoroughly lacking in social trust (Fukuyama, 2002 p 32)*

The way in which children participate in society will obviously be influenced by the social capital and networks of the society in which they live. Study into the social capital of children is scant but growing. Harpham (2002) suggests that social capital from the point of view of a child has generally been seen from two different perspectives; within and outside the family. She notes that most attempts to measure children's social capital have been 'top-down', looking at the ability of parents to invest in the child's future, rather than the perspective of the sociology of childhood (to be discussed later in this chapter), that would see children as social actors in their own right. Morrow (1999) takes this position, arguing that the social context of children extends beyond the family to peers, out of school activities, work and to many other areas that do not include their parents. By inference, then, children participate, to varying degrees in a range of social interactions. As will be discussed later in this chapter, and contrary to Morrow's claims, in Western countries in particular, the space children have outside the family appears to be decreasing. On the other hand, in many developing countries children appear more visible, often in terms of their sheer numbers but also in the way in which they take part in what has become to be seen in the West as the 'adult world', particularly the world of work.

## ***Participatory Methods***

Despite the conceptual challenges in defining participation, it is generally recognised that participation must in some way form a part of development processes. As a result there has been a growth in participatory tools, for example those devised by Robert Chambers (1983), and typologies to try to encourage participation and to capture the types and degrees of participation (for example, Biggs, 1989; Cornwall, 1995; Gujit, 1991, Hart 1992). Participatory ladders such as Arnstein's (see Figure 1 above) provide a particular conceptual framework for organisations wishing to become more participative.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), developed by Robert Chambers (1983) are perhaps the best known of a growing number and variety of participatory tools and techniques. Some critics of these tools (e.g. Cooke and Kothari, 2001) suggest that participation could be seen as the new 'development tyranny', devaluing traditional means of decision-making, reinforcing existing power dynamics and inhibiting other methods of development that might be more effective. From their perspective, such tools often reflect a simplistic understanding of power dynamics and risk becoming instruments of social control (Cooke, 2001), rather than freeing people to participate on their own terms. Henkel and Stirrat (2001) suggest that the push for participation could be equated with an evangelical movement, with its promise of salvation and preaching a specific vision of community that may unwittingly undermine existing community structures, resulting in what Foucault calls 'subjection' (Foucault, 1980).

## Conclusion

The discussion above suggests that locating participation within the community development discourse is challenging. However, numerous development organisations extol the virtues and benefits of participatory approaches, including one of the most influential and largest development organisations, the World Bank, as illustrated by the words of the then president James D. Wolfensohn, in 1996:

*I personally believe in the relevance of participatory approaches and partnerships in development and am committed to making them a way of doing business in the Bank (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 1996).*

Indeed the ability and the right to participate have become the cornerstones for many of the human rights treaties that have evolved during the last century, as will be discussed in the following section. Participatory processes, however, entail certain risks. The tendency, often, is to paint empowerment and participation as some kind of 'development nirvana in which everyone gaily commits themselves to what can be quite conflictual and tedious processes of local analysis and planning' (Gujit and Shah, 1998p 10). Furthermore, it could be argued that debate over what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' participation has tended to result in overlooking gender issues, assuming that they will be taken care of through the participation process (Mayo and Craig, 1995). The way in which gender differentiated knowledge and perception exists within participatory process has been illustrated by Kindon (1998) and Goebel (1998) and neglecting to take into account gendered power dynamics only serves to reinforce traditional male hegemony. Such neglect could apply even more so to children within the development process.

## *Locating participation within the child rights discourse*

*Although children have rights they don't always get them. As soon as a child is born it has needs (clothing etc). A child should be educated, have time to play, and should be with the parents. Children not with their families – on the streets, have rights too (like me). Children should have the right to an education, when a child is educated they can think and decide on their own.<sup>5</sup>*

### ***A historical progression towards children's right to participate***

Tun Naing's comment above exemplifies one of the current dilemmas relating to children's rights and participation; while rights might often make immutable sense, they are seldom fully realised. From a human rights perspective, participation is foundational to a number of international conventions that have become major instruments, not only for dealing with disputes within and between countries but also providing benchmarks for individual and collective freedoms and responsibilities.

The contemporary concept of individual human rights has its origins in the Age of Enlightenment, although perhaps the first human rights document might be considered to be the Magna Carta, signed in 1215 (Verhellen, 2000). Well before this, most if not all, religious scriptures made reference to some form of documentation of rights and responsibilities. The Ten Commandments in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Precepts of the Buddha and the Koran all contain teachings of respect and responsibility which reflect some of the underlying values of current human rights instruments. It was, however, in 1689 when the 'Bill of Rights' was signed, again in England, taking away the absolute power of the king

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<sup>5</sup> Tun Naing, a street child in World Vision Myanmar's Street Children's program in Rangoon.

and putting it into the hands of an elected Parliament (Houses of Lords and Commons) that the modern human rights movement has its origins. Almost a century later, across the Atlantic in 1776, the American Revolution led to the 'Declaration of Independence' which stated that 'All men are created Equal'. In 1789 the French Revolution resulted in the 'Declaration of Human Rights and Civil Rights'. A number of other conventions including 'The Geneva Convention' (1864), 'The Hague Convention' (1899), 'The International Convention on the Abolition of Slavery' (1926) came into force before the need for a globally accepted standard on rights led to the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' in 1948.

The period of time after 1948 saw a rapid growth in the number and extent of human rights treaties. At the present time more than 80 treaties are in existence. Verhellen (2000) divides the development of human rights documents into three distinct areas: 'First generation rights', which refer to the civil and political rights, such as the right to freedom of opinion or assembly that, while providing protection from certain forms of abuse, assign negligible responsibility to the state; 'second generation rights' which begin to assert the responsibility of the state in areas such as income (a minimum wage) and education (compulsory primary schooling); and, more recently, 'third generation rights', which relate to more global issues such as the right to peace and to a clean environment. While not all treaties have been signed by all countries, a number have received widespread ratification and none more so than the Convention on The Rights of The Child. This has been signed and ratified by all but two sovereign nations, Somalia and the United States of America.

Most human rights treaties, particularly those of the second and third generations, enshrine the right to freedom of expression and participation of individuals within the State in all matters affecting them. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (See Appendix 1), for example, in its very first article, states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Article 19 in the same treaty safeguards the right of freedom of opinion and expression, the underlying belief upon which much participatory theory and practice is based. This treaty, however, does not include many specific references to children. Those that do, such as Article 25, see children primarily as the responsibility of their parents and focus on their protection and afford children and their mothers' special care. Others affirm the right of children to free and compulsory primary education (Article 26, section 1) and accentuate the need for education to be directed at the full development of the human personality (Article 26, section 2).

These articles reinforce the ideal of the child as someone requiring care and protection and needing to be educated in order to attain the necessary skills and 'human personality' required for productive adult life. Parents, not children, are given the responsibility of identifying the most appropriate form of education for their child (Article 26 section 3).

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which came into force on 23 March 1976, made similar reference to children. Article 14 made special reference to the right of children involved in criminal or matrimonial dispute proceedings to privacy; the right of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children (Article 18) and for the protection of children (Article 23).

The Covenant also made reference to children's right to non-discrimination and to acquire a nationality (Article 24).

While such human rights instruments claimed universality regardless of race, colour, religion, gender or age, many of the articles (such as those quoted above) left little doubt as to the dependency of children primarily on their parents and on the state. It is due to concerns that children were not being seen as holders of rights, apart from those derived through their relationships with their parents and family, that the second half of the last century saw a growing movement towards the recognition of children as bearers of rights themselves and the need for a specific human rights treaty for children (Verhellen, 2000). This resulted in the Convention on the Rights of the Child which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989 after nearly ten years and a drafting process that included over forty sovereign nations. The CRC was preceded by a number of other international treaties including the 1924 Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child. It contains 54 articles in total and can broadly be divided into four distinct parts, Survival / Prevention; Protection; Development / Provision; and Participation. Some of the Articles specifically those that infer children's right to participation (Articles 12, 13, 14 and 15; see Appendix 1) take a dramatic departure from the earlier, more dependent view of childhood adopted in other human rights treaties; affording the child rights of expression, thought, conscience and religion, previously granted only to adults or parents on behalf of the child. The CRC incorporates civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural rights and is the first legally binding international instrument to do so (UNICEF, 2003a). According to Van Bueren

(1996), the CRC accomplishes a number of goals. Firstly, it affords children a number of previously un-recognised rights such as the right to the preservation of identity. Secondly, it enshrines these rights in a global treaty. Thirdly, it creates binding standards where previously there were only non-binding recommendations, for example relating to safeguards around adoption procedures. Fourthly, it obliges states to address the protection of children, including harmful cultural practices. Finally, it stresses the duty of state parties not to discriminate against children in realising their rights.

Becoming signatory to human rights conventions and translating the same into policy, law and action are quite different undertakings. This is particularly so with participation. In the introduction to a recent book, *Stepping Forward, Children and Young People's Participation in the Development Process* (Johnson et al, 1998), Judith Ennew laments the absence of an integrated discourse on child participation. She notes that, despite increasing incidence of the participation of children in development projects over recent years, success is generally claimed on anecdotal reports with little hard evidence, and that:

*Instances in which children are truly involved in programming, planning and evaluation are rare (Johnson et al, 1998: p.xix).*

### ***Key dilemmas with participation in the child rights discourse***

#### ***The best interests of the child***

Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been responsible for fundamental advances in the social, educational and physical status of children around the world, it is not without ambiguities. For example, Article Three states that:

*In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (UNICEF, 2003a).*

The 'best interest' clause first appeared in International Law, in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959, which stated that the 'the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration' in the 'enhancement of laws' in relation to children. It is included in six other CRC articles: separation from parents, 9(3); parental responsibilities, 18(1); deprivation of family environment, 20(1); adoption, 21(a); restriction of liberty, 37(c); and court hearings involving juveniles, 40(2)(b)(iii). The best interests principle is also reflected in a number of other international agreements and instruments: two articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the 1986 UN Declaration relating to foster placement and adoption; the work of the Human Rights Committee in interpreting the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the 1990 Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child; and the work of the European Commission of Human Rights (Pearson and Collins, 2002).

The concept of best interest has been criticised as a fundamentally Western concept (Breen, 2002) and analysis does raise certain questions. The most contentious of these is the fine line that is sometimes drawn between allowing the child the right to participate and protecting the child from harm. Whether or not children should work is a case in point. The concept of children working to support either themselves or their family may be difficult to come to terms with for many in modern industrialised countries, yet the reality for a large proportion of the world's children is that *not* to work is a luxury (Boyden et al., 1998). Susan Bissell, who

researched the impact of globalisation on child Bangladeshi garment factory workers, noted that the Harkin Bill of 1996 (a bill known as the Child Labour Deterrence Act), which passed through the United State Senate in 1993, enforced sanctions on goods made with child labour. The result, rather than to encourage children to enter school, was that thousands of Bengali children lost their jobs and many were forced into far more risky forms of work (Bissell, 2003). Although both children and parents who were interviewed as a part of this study subscribed to the ideal of education and a 'happy' childhood, the reality that they articulated was very different. Illustrating how the 'best interest' principle could be manipulated for political gain, Bissell went on to suggest that the Harkin Bill was an imposition of Western values of childhood (i.e. that children should not work but go to school) used to maintain market dominance in the global textile trade by undermining Bangladesh's source of cheap labour (its children).

### What is a child?

The difficulty of translating human rights instruments for children into action, particularly aspects relating to participation, is partly due to apparent ambiguity within some of the key concepts and terminology of the convention. Not least of these is defining childhood and the term child. The convention defines a child as anyone under the age of eighteen. However, in many countries 'children' of a much younger age are already raising their own families and have become responsible for the income and survival of their parents and siblings. Children as young as seven years old have been enlisted into militias and have died on the battlefield. In Nepal 7% of girls are married by the age of ten (Thomas and Hocking, 2003). Such ambiguity raises questions about the relevance of the CRC

across cultures and, more fundamentally, from where the perception of childhood, as promoted in the convention, has come.

Even though the CRC asserts 18 as the age of majority, it attempts to further qualify what is and is not appropriate for children through a number of different articles that attempt to nuance the stricture of age. However, this can be argued to foster even greater ambiguity. Article Twelve (one of the key 'participation' articles), for example, states that:

1. *The child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

2. *For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.*

This view would, on the one hand, have children enabled or empowered to have direct influence over all matters that have an impact on them, depending on their age and maturity. On the other hand, the article could be seen to have the effect of further confusing definitions as to what issues, if any, do not affect children to some extent, and who is to decide the level of maturity of a particular child? Notwithstanding the provision of an appropriate representative as outlined in the second part of Article 12, it can be argued that in a court of law the burden of proof will be on the child (or his/her representative) to prove that he or she is capable of expressing his or her own views.

Furthermore, why is the arbitrary age of 18 years old the decisive point at which one suddenly becomes able to make decisions with competence and full responsibility when it is commonly accepted that the human brain continues to physically develop well into the 20's (Begley, 2000).

Expectations of what children can and cannot do are by no means universal, even from a legal perspective, and legal regulations have, themselves, changed through history. For example, in the United Kingdom, in 1860, the age of consent was set at 12 years old. This was adjusted to 13 in 1875 and rose to 16 in 1885. Between 1967 and 1994, the age of consent for homosexuals was set at 21, then from 1994 to 2001 at 18. From 2001 to the present time, this reverted to 16, to conform to standards set for heterosexuals. The age of consent in Chile and Panama at the present time is 11 years old and 12 in Japan and Spain (Thomas and Hocking, 2003). Although in Japan, prefecture legislature generally abides by the CRC.

Indeed, there are obvious areas where children could be seen to be far more competent than adults. As Karel Mulderij (1996) points out, when comparing children's physical movement and ability to that of an adult, it is not difficult to observe who is more competent in terms of grace and form. One only needs to look at the ever decreasing age of many athletes, particularly gymnasts, to confirm such an observation. In 1996, for example, the average age for female Olympic gymnasts was around fifteen (Barry, 2001). Such a perspective brings into question the idea that children are growing into something more fully developed (Mulderij, 1996). Physical ability is by no means the only area in which children's competence seems to outstrip that of adults. As many parents will attest, their

children are often far more computer literate and able to manoeuvre around the often overwhelming array of technical necessities of the modern household, such as remote controls and modern electrical appliances.

Article 12 also states that extent to which the views of the child are taken into account should be based on the maturity of the child. However, there is a cultural divergence in the understanding of competence and maturity and this has differed within cultures over time, depending on prevailing societal norms. Vygotsky (1962), a Russian psychologist, suggested that child development is dictated by culture. By inference, notions of when and how it is appropriate for a child to participate will also be partly dependent upon cultural norms:

*What a cultural approach emphasises is the respects in which the environment for child development is shaped by human action, profoundly social in character and at all times mediated by cultural processes (Woodhead, 1999 p 11).*

The importance of cultural context is echoed by other scholars, for example, Rogoff who notes:

*The developmental endpoint that has traditionally anchored cognitive developmental theories – skill in academic activities such as formal operational reasoning and scientific, mathematical, and literate practices – is one valuable goal of development, but one that is tied to its contexts and culture, as is any other goal or endpoint of development valued by a community...Each community's valued skills constitute the local goals of development...In the final analysis, it is not possible to determine whether the practices of one society are more adaptive than those of another, as judgements of adaptation cannot be separated from values (Barbara Rogoff cited in Woodhead, 1999 p12)*

### The Evolving Capacities of the Child

At the heart of these 'dilemmas' is the fine and difficult balance between the degree to which children require the protection of adults and the freedom to be able to make their own decisions and take responsibility for their own actions. No-one could argue that a young baby is almost totally dependent upon those around it to provide food, warmth, love and affection. As a child grows, however, this apparent dependence decreases. Children, often from a young age, look to assert their own desires, wants and needs. Clearly, as Vygotsky suggests, this is dependent upon a variety of factors, not the least of which is the culture in which the child is brought up. Societal norms, education (both of children and adults), experience and legal stipulations might also influence the degree to which the protection of the child takes precedence over the child's growing autonomy. Article 5 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the concept of evolving capacities, mediates between these apparently conflicting themes:

#### *Article 5*

*States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the present Convention.*

Simply stated, this article affords children the right to claim their growing autonomy with the assurance that family, community and state will be there to provide the necessary protection as they develop independence. The degree to which parent or guardian can impose their own restrictions over the child is tempered by the use

of the phrase, 'appropriate direction and guidance'. This acknowledges the responsibility of both for negotiating the child's pathway to adulthood. The interdependence and the notion of community responsibility articulated in this article also suggests that rights should not be seen as highly individualistic but, "Understood in this way, it becomes clear that human rights affirm rather than challenge principles of inter-dependence and reciprocity" (Lansdown, 2005b p5).

This is the first instance of the notion of evolving capacities being incorporated into a human rights treaty and despite its apparent common sense, the translation of such a concept into law is challenging. For example, the extent to which laws should set age limits for different activities may become overly bureaucratic and fail to recognise that children develop competencies at different ages. Article 6 which asserts the survival and cognitive, social, emotional, physical and moral development of children is further strengthened by a number of other articles that refer to children's development (such as 23, 27, 28, 29, 31) and together elaborate on how evolving capacities might be taken into account in a variety of environments including the school and the home (Lansdown, 2005b). Together, these articles attempt to provide children, regardless of gender or culture, the right to gradually explore their growing autonomy as they are ready and for parents, the community and the state, the responsibility to adequately provide protection and guidance without asserting ownership of the child. A vital element of this dynamic is what Lansdown refers to the 'participatory' or 'emancipatory' concept of the notion of evolving capacities:

*Articles 5 and 12, and, indeed, the overall philosophy of the Convention, establishes children's role as active participants in*

*decision-making processes that affect their lives (Lansdown, 2005b p22)*

### ***Models of child participation***

Notwithstanding the dilemmas that accompany child rights law, there have been significant advances in thinking around children's participation over the past decade. Participation might be seen in a number of ways but primarily could be divided into two distinct subsets; participating in an activity or participating in decision-making. The two are not mutually exclusive although the latter is likely to imply a greater degree of democratic process and autonomy. As Thomas (2007) identifies, different commentators have identified varying reasons for the importance of participation. They relate to a broad range of areas affecting children including protection, decision-making, the upholding of children's rights, the development of skills and self-esteem to name a few. Matthews (2003) suggests three reasons for children's participation: firstly, that it assists in the development of active citizens; secondly, that it assists in young people finding their place in society; and thirdly, that it strengthens young people's status in relation to adults.

Much of the conceptualisation of children's participation, therefore, has taken place around the idea of children's evolution into decision-makers. Perhaps most notable to date has been a model developed by Roger Hart (1997) (based on the work of Arnstein, discussed previously) for encapsulating various stages of child participation, in a ladder with eight different rungs (see Figure 2). Hart, in looking at how children can become active participants in environmental programs, envisaged a series of steps (rungs on a ladder) through which children can rise to

reach progressively more sophisticated levels of participation. As the diagram indicates, the lower three rungs refer to manipulation and tokenism, much in the same way as Arnstein's lower rungs and they do not constitute participation at all. In such instances children are not given a choice and appear primarily to meet the needs of adults. Genuine participation begins to occur from the fourth rung of the ladder where children, even though they may have little

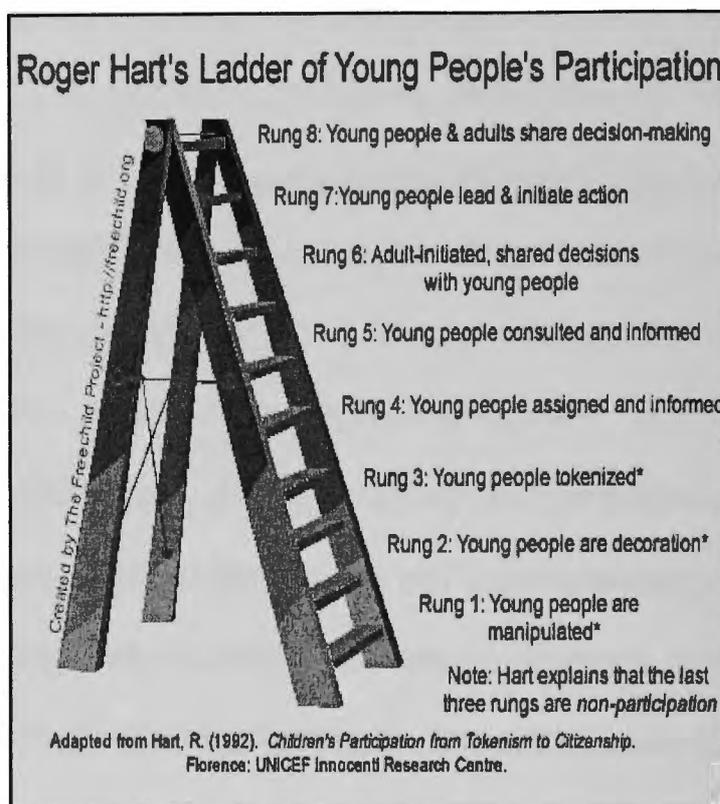


Figure 3 Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation

choice in participating, do so in an informed manner. For example, a school might involve children in an environmental cleanup activity. The next rung indicates a greater level of consultation, with children in planning and so on, culminating in a process that leads to shared responsibility for decision-making between adults and children.

Hart's model has been widely used and has been a valuable tool to assist development projects to think through how children are treated within community development practice. It has led to the development of other linear models such as that of Barbara Franklin (1995) in Figure 3 below. She defined 10 levels of participation, culminating in children taking charge of an initiative, calling on adults only when they need assistance.

Barbara Franklin Model of Participation	
<i>Non-Participation</i>	
0	No consideration. Children are not given any help or consideration at all. They are ignored.
1	Adults rule. Adults make all the decisions. Children are told nothing except what they must do.
2	Adults rule kindly. Adults make all the decisions. Children are told what to do and are given reasons and explanations.
<i>Participation</i>	
3	Manipulation. Adults decide what to do and ask children if they agree. Children must agree.
4	Decoration. Adults decide what to do. Children take part by singing, dancing and performing ceremonial functions.
5	Tokenism. Adults decide what to do. Afterwards, children are allowed to decide on some of the minor aspects.
6	Invitation. Adults invite children's ideas but make decisions themselves, in their terms.
7	Consultation. Adults consult children and consider their opinion carefully, and then adults decide, taking all opinions into account.
8	Joint decision. Adults and children decide together on the basis of equality.
9	Children lead, adults help. Children lead in deciding with help from adults.
10	Children in charge. Children decide what to do. Adults get involved only if children ask for their help

Table 2 - Barbara Franklin's model of participation

These two ladders bear much similarity, despite the very different end goal of a participatory endeavour; Hart's shared responsibility as opposed to Franklin's children in charge. However, although such tools help to further clarify notions of participation and empowerment of children, they still fail to capture the complex nature of these concepts. The 'ladders' may be seen as simplistic, in that they portray power as a linear relationship of exploitation, very clearly defined according to those who possess power and those who do not. This denies a more nuanced understanding of power that is multi-dimensional and acknowledges that individuals, no matter what their social status, gender and age are, by virtue of their own humanity, caught up in power relationships.

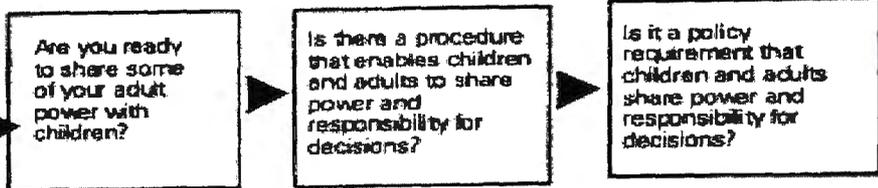
A slightly more nuanced model of participation (below ) is provided by Shier (2001)

**Levels of participation**

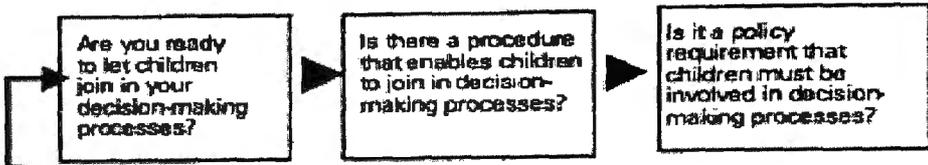
**Openings > Opportunities > Obligations**



**5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.**

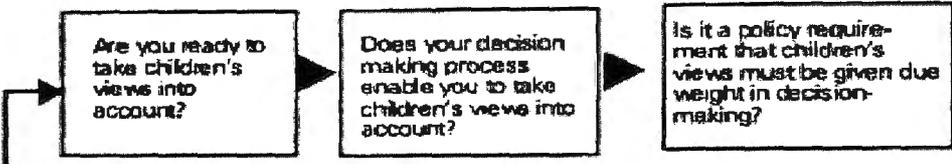


**4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.**

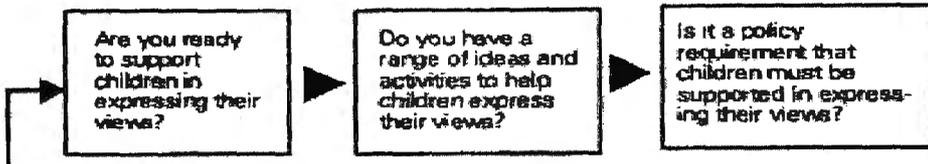


*This point is the minimum you must achieve if you endorse the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*

**3. Children's views are taken into account.**



**2. Children are supported in expressing their views.**



**1. Children are listened to.**

**START HERE**

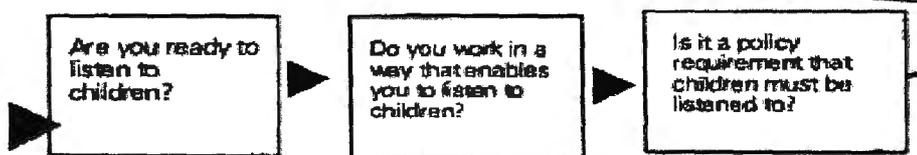


Figure 4 Pathways to Participation by Harry Shier

This model is based on five levels of participation that appear in the left hand side of the diagram beginning from 'children being listened to' and ending in 'children sharing power and responsibility for decision-making'. Across the top of the model there are three stages that refer to the organisational interest and commitment to be inclusive of children's perspectives; openings, opportunities and obligations. The model is more nuanced than Hart's or Franklins and takes into account the varying degree of commitment to involving children that an organisation may

exhibit as well as the factors within the child or group of children that may affect or inhibit their participation. In the same manner as Hart, however, the model is linear and does not adequately illustrate the notion of children's participation beyond a specific project or activity.

Emmanuelle Abrioux (1998) illustrates the importance of power within the participatory discourse through her work with girls attending a street children's program in Kabul, Afghanistan. In a country such as this, where girls are denied access to formal education and participation in any public forum after the age of 12, participatory processes can risk personal safety, and Abrioux claims that even the decision made by a girl to attend the program is a significant form of participation:

*The decision of the girls to come down to the centre and attend an activity would, therefore be a considerable way along a spherical process, taking into account the starting point (although not necessarily high if rated on a ladder scale) (Abrioux, 1998 p 26).*

In contrast to the hierarchical structure of the ladder models already discussed, she suggests that a spherical model (Figure 5 below) of participation is more useful, particularly in situations where the rights of certain groups are constrained. Participation theory, therefore must take into account notions of power more comprehensively.

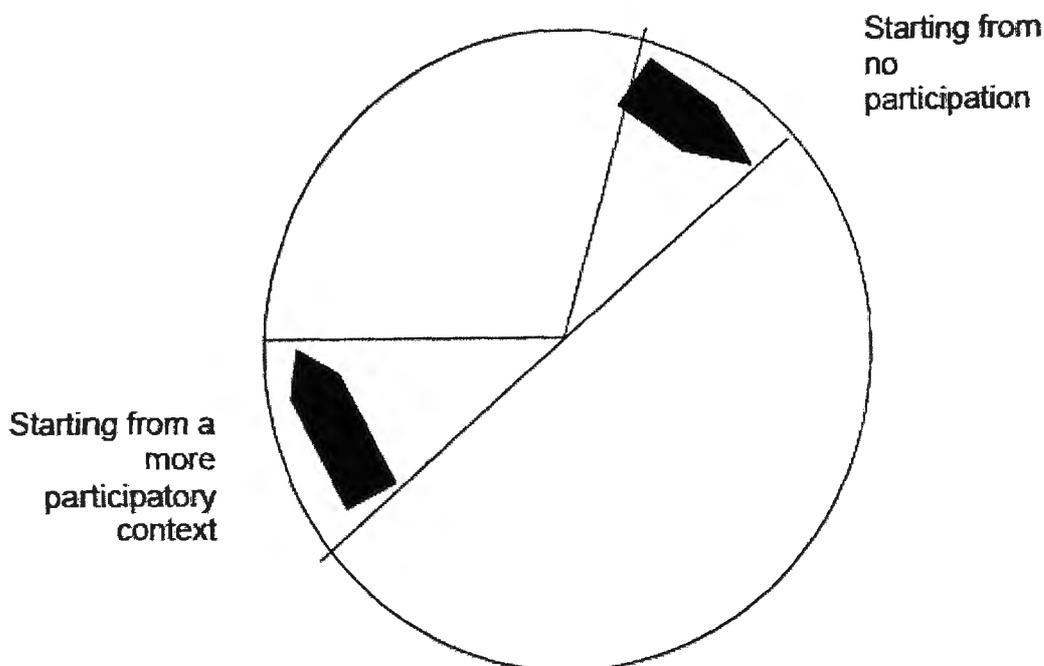


Figure 4 - Abrioux's spherical model of participation

Thomas (2007) identifies a dual nature of participation observing that:

*There is a discourse of children's participation that is predominantly social – that speaks of networks, of inclusion, of adult-child relations, and of the opportunities for social connection that participatory practice can create. Alongside this there is an alternative discourse that is more or less overtly political – that speaks of power, and challenge, and change (Thomas, 2007 p 206)*

A further analysis of power, therefore, becomes necessary if participation is to be better understood.

### ***Participation and power***

Participation is subject to an expansive breadth of definition but is often seen narrowly as a methodology to improve project performance through the inclusion of stakeholder knowledge and rarely as mutual decision-making process with shared agendas. VeneKlasen et al (2004) suggest that systems and structures of 'power' can prevent participation and can work against the fulfilment of rights. Power takes

many forms and may be overt and visible, or subtle and hidden. In the case of the latter, it becomes more insidious, distorting meaning and notions of acceptability, affecting the way in which people shape their world, their values and notions of what is right and wrong.

At a fundamental level, human rights question structures of power. This is their primary function. By inference then, participation, a crucial element of rights and participatory development, must seek to do the same. 'Empowered' individuals and communities are those that find the strength and ability to challenge systems of power, despite the associated risk. Of course some choose to challenge power openly and others do not. As the following chapter on Burma will suggest, silence in opposition is not unusual, nor is it a sign of a lack of power.

However, even this analysis of power has been questioned. Perhaps the best known analysis of power in recent times has been that of Michele Foucault (1980). He compares power to an idea of Jeremy Bentheim for prison reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Bentheim claimed to have designed the perfect prison, known as the Panopticon, in which all cells opened up to a central tower where prisoners were under constant scrutiny, never escaping the gaze of the tower and unable to see or communicate with each other. Foucault suggests that power:

*...must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization... [Individuals] are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. ...Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (Foucault, 1980, p98).*

If we are to acknowledge the complexity of power to this extent, then present participatory approaches, particularly the simplified participatory tools often used by development practitioners, may be considered naïve and they run the risk of creating more problems than they might aim to resolve.

Foucault argues that power is not necessarily negative, that:

*...power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (Foucault, 1979 p93)*

In relation to children, this distinction is crucial and begins to shed light on some of the deeper complexities relating to children's participation and the problem associated with having 'children in charge', which is the logical conclusion for the linear power based models encapsulated in Franklin's ladder. Whereas linear models suggest that increasing participation implies a transferral of power from adults to children, a Foucauldian analysis might claim that children already assert power in their relationships with those around them and the structures that bind and create society. A child's cry, for example, is sufficient to galvanise a parental reaction and is therefore an expression of the existence of power dynamics between parent and child. This suggests that children have the potential capacity to assert power, even as infants. The extent of their actual power is constrained by adults, society and what society sees as their rights and responsibilities. In other words, the construction of power relationships is dependent upon the way in which societies define the nature of childhood. Adding even greater complexity to this observation, as Froner argues, there is not simply one childhood but many 'childhoods':

*...formed at the intersection of different cultural, social and economic systems, natural and man-made physical environments. Different positions in society produce different experiences (Frones, 1993 in James and Prout, 1997, p.xiii)*

So then, if we are to fully understand the nature of participation and the crucial role that power exerts on intergenerational relationships, it is necessary to consider a further discourse, one that will help to deconstruct the notions of childhoods; that of the sociology of childhood.

### *Locating participation within the sociology of childhood discourse*

Just as development theory and rights based approaches can be construed within the Western European and North American tradition of historical experience, so can current notions of childhood. However, as development and rights based paradigms have been challenged (for example Escobar, 1995, Said, 1979) so too have theoretical paradigms of child development (James and Prout, 1997).

### ***Constructions of Childhood***

Childhood is a relatively recent construction in the West. Some authors trace the emergence of the current Western notions of childhood back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Period of European Enlightenment. According to Gottlieb (1993) young people in medieval society shared most tasks with their elders but from the period of the Enlightenment on, children became increasingly marginalized from participation in societal production and decision-making roles. With industrialisation and the need for a skilled and well-educated labour force, children became 'economically worthless but emotionally priceless' (Zelizer 1994). Increasingly then, with the emergence of full time education, children became less able to make any economic contribution to society and, therefore, were less able to influence any decision-

making processes (Stein 1995). A 'good childhood' became one in which the child lived a protected life in a nuclear family in which he/she would eventually make their passage to adulthood and productivity. Some authors argue that during the Middle Ages children were routinely abandoned, that infanticide was common, and that it has only been since the Classical Era that children were treated with any sense of 'humanity' (deMause, 1974). Postman (1982) supports this argument observing that during the middle ages, due to the absence of literacy, education and the concept of shame, that there was very little difference between what adults and children knew and were exposed to.

Other authors, for example the French historian, Philippe Ariès (1914-1984), in his book, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (published in 1960), claim that childhood did not exist as a separate anthropological category at all, during the Middle Ages. Although Ariès writings have been brought into question (due to his iconographic research methods), there is no doubt that childhood was seen quite differently before the Age of Enlightenment and that the idealised notions of childhood, as described by Holt, as the 'mythic walled garden of happy, safe protected innocent childhood which all children ideally inhabited' (Holt, 1975 p 22-23) evolved as children were increasingly removed from the world of work and responsibility and placed in institutions (schools) to be given time to learn how to become productive and socially responsible adults.

Needless to say, this process varied depending on the social class of the child. Some authors (such as Depaepe, 1996) have added to this understanding by pointing out that along with the era of enlightenment and the growth of the nuclear

family grew the ideal of romantic love, the reduction of marriage as an economic transaction and the gradual separation of childhood from the adult world. Children in the middle classes, once exposed to the everyday activities of adults, were progressively sheltered from exposure to activities such as sex, death and even bad language. Of course, children of poor families had no such luxury. However, with the introduction of universal and compulsory education and the simultaneous growth of both a religious and social concern for the underprivileged, the expectation grew that even poor and marginalized children should have the opportunity for education and a 'childhood'. This saw the growth of a discourse around childhood and youth, based on an increasing pedagogical interest in children.

Key societal institutions, particularly the church, also began to take a very strong role in many countries in Europe, leading to standards in such areas as sexuality and discipline. As a part of this development, in the late 1800's and into the 1900's, youth organisations, such as the Boy Scouts, were developed as a response to a concern that poor youth, who had not had the benefit of middle class values and education, might be the cause of civil unrest, if left to their own devices. Along with this grew the idealisation of the life of the child and the appearance of the fairy tale endings in literature that were always happy and that did away with anything that might upset the child or sour the vision of the ideal childhood.

Verhellen (2000) suggests that there were in fact two primary strands of thought relating to childhood that grew from the period of the Enlightenment. Firstly that in which children were seen as inherently 'bad' and needed to be educated to be

made 'good' (a Biblical perspective with an emphasis on school and family) and the romantic tradition, which saw children as 'innocent' and 'inherently good' (Rousseau and Goethe in the 18th Century), in which children needed to be protected from society/culture. Both perspectives, however, looked at childhood as a separate entity from adulthood. Childhood, thus, began to be looked upon as a stage in the development of becoming fully human and children were seen as the future; tomorrow's potential. In turn, this brought about child-specific fields of endeavour such as paediatrics in the 19th Century and child protection in the early 20th Century. The institutionalisation of children in school could be seen as a further means through which children were closed off from, and prepared for, the adult world. Galie Cannella (1999), in a Foucauldian analysis of education and power suggests that children's lives, at least in the Western world, have been shaped by the discourse of education that has,

*psychologized and biologized younger human beings, creating the universal condition of childhood (Cannella, 1999, p37).*

This discourse, she claims, is maintained through an array of disciplinary technologies that are designed to control, shape, and mould young bodies and minds.

Childhood in the period between the two world wars saw the growth of mass youth organisations which reflected the social polarisations of the day (for example, socialist and religious) and, finally, with the post modern era and the development of consumer society Depaepe (1996) contests that, despite the revolutionary nature of the 1960s, the conservative backlash in the 1970s has left children and youth increasingly locked tightly within our definitions and ideals of childhood.

As a result, a number of assumptions have emerged in western society. Firstly that children go through developmental stages in their path to adulthood. Secondly that adults and children display fundamental differences in the way in which they perceive and respond to the world around them: adults are responsible while children are only interested in play; adults display rationality while children are overly emotional and irrational; adults are capable of abstract thought while children are not; and adults are sexual beings while children are asexual. Finally that, until children become adults, they need to be separated from the adult world in places where they can be gradually assisted, in accordance with their maturity and age, in their destiny of becoming fully human, or, in other words, an adult (Skolnick, 1983).

Such assumptions fit neatly into positivist thought, where children can be seen as separate and different: as a part of a whole; part of an adult; part of a person; not yet a person. As a result they have become a subject of research and fragmented into separate parts; psychological, physical, cognitive, and emotional; objects to be studied. As Theresa Richardson (cited in Depaepe, 1996) contends, children are:

*Caught as a historical euphemism placed in the ironic position that the more we have tried to define and capture 'real' child life, the more we have reinforced childhood as a metaphor for something other than the biological entity we have singled out to manipulate' (Depaepe, 1996 p 63).*

### ***The 'sociology of childhood'***

Although the CRC has become one of the main catalysts for changing notions of childhood, at a policy level in many countries, over the past two decades, there has also been a growing interest in the study of children in academic circles.

Previously unquestionable authorities on child development (Piaget for example), have increasingly come under scrutiny as new understandings of childhood have been cast on to the academic arena (Ackerman et al., 2003). Coupled with this has been a growing awareness that childhood is not all we would like it to be or, perhaps, pretend that it is. Over the past 10 to 15 years, particular issues concerning children have received intensive media coverage. 'Child labour', 'child slaves' and 'child soldiers' are now common and confronting phrases used in most newspapers around the world (Dorning, 2002).

Perhaps most of all (at least in the Western media), the issue of child sexual abuse has brought to light and questioned the now commonly accepted ideal of childhood. This issue can be explored as an example of the complexity behind our present construction of childhood. Jenny Kitzinger (1997) in her article *Who Are You Kidding? Children, Power and the Struggle Against Sexual Abuse*, sees issues of sexual abuse closely bound up in the contemporary discourses on sexuality, family, gender class and race (Campbell, 1988, Parton and Parton, 1988). Also these debates draw on a variety of discourses on childhood, as child sexual abuse, above all, is presented as a crime against childhood.

Kitzinger's research is based on interviews with 30 women who were abused as children, as well as on newspaper articles that have appeared in British newspapers, other forms of media, leaflets, educational videos, books and articles on child abuse. She contends that these are discourses on childhood innocence, passivity and innate vulnerability and argues that the portrayal of child sexual abuse is a violation of childhood:

*is an assertion of what childhood really is or should be (Kitzinger, 1997 p 166)*

Our contemporary (Western) view of childhood is one that assumes that this period is a time of untroubled play. That a child could be considered a sexual being (or any other sort of being apart from one in the making) is seldom considered. However as Kitzinger observes:

*...what is happening now...is a fetishistic glorification of the 'innate innocence' of childhood, and, indeed, a rhetoric which implies that sexual abuse stains that innocence (Kitzinger, 1997 p167).*

Kitzinger argues that this concept of innocence is now exploited to incite public revulsion and that this is problematic for three primary reasons. Firstly, portraying innocence may actually serve to encourage the would be abuser:

*if defiling the pure and deflowering the virgin is supposed to be erotic, then focussing on children's presumed innocence only reinforces their desirability as sexual objects (Kitzinger, 1997 p168)*

Secondly, she points out that portraying children as innocents actually stigmatises those children who could be considered flirtatious or sexually aware:

*If the violation of innocence is the criterion against which the act of sexual abuse is judged then violating a 'knowing child' becomes a lesser offence than violating as 'innocent child (Kitzinger, 1997 p168).*

Finally and most crucially, she contends that the focus on innocence is counter-productive, as it is an ideology that denies children any access to power, knowledge and responsibility and, therefore, actually increases their vulnerability to abuse. An 'innocent' child is, by definition, to be shielded from, or in other words denied access to, the adult world.

As a result of the prominence of the CRC and the renewed academic interest in children, the modern study of childhood has become multi-disciplinary, challenging previous (Western) understandings of childhood that would see children as adults in the making and childhood as an age of innocence and learning to 'become'. According to Alan Prout (1996), four theoretical models of the sociology of childhood have emerged in recent times. Firstly, 'childhood as part of a social structure' (e.g. Qvirtrup 1990 and Sgritta and Saporiti 1989), which argues that childhood is a permanent feature of social structure. Secondly, 'children in their social contexts', which analyses childhood in terms of the different environments that children inhabit. It holds the notion of children as agents of interaction between these different environments (e.g. James 1997, Solberg 1990 and Bluebond-Langner 1979). Thirdly, children as a minority group, which bears similarities to feminist studies and which sees children as a group with common features, particularly relating to their exploitation and oppression (by adults) (e.g. Oakley and Mayall 1994). Finally, there are those who view children and childhood as a social construct of their historical context (e.g. Jenks 1986 and O'Neil 1995). Prout claims that all of these perspectives can be seen in the light of two theoretical dimensions:

*Reductively these can be stated as: the socially determined character of childhood or the agency of children; and the extent to which childhood is thought of as a unitary or pluralistic entity (Prout, 1996 p155).*

James and Prout (1997), therefore, seek to identify a new paradigm for the understanding of childhood. They claim that rather than a 'training ground' for adulthood, childhood should be seen as a social construction and as a variable of

social analysis (alongside such issues as class, gender and ethnicity) and that children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right.

They contend:

*that children must be seen as active participants in the construction of their own social lives, not passive subjects of social structures and processes (James and Prout, 1997 p8).*

This perspective is reinforced by others who argue that children construct their own social worlds, forming relationships with both adults and other children and that such relationships are influential not only in terms of how adults 'socialise' children but also in the way in which children influence adult lives (Mayall, 2002). More recently, James and Prout (1997) have argued that underlying our understandings of childhood are four dichotomous themes; agency and structure, universalism and particularism, local and global and continuity and change (James et al., 1998) and that childhood exists somewhere along these planes.

Such academic theorising has encouraged the development of different perspectives of rights and has even brought into question the dominance of the child rights paradigm itself. Karel Mulderij (1996), for example, asserts that children have three fundamental rights: the right to vital freedom, which is the right to express their nature and their vitality; the right to instrumental freedom which refers to the freedom of action by virtue of being able to make choices; and the right to give things meaning and to be allowed to keep their own perspective. She observes that vital children are happy children and that sick children lose that vitality. Happiness, although a somewhat simplistic notion at first glance, is probably a very clear indicator of how children are feeling about themselves within

the world that they inhabit and by inference their ability to communicate and participate in activities and decisions being made around them. Defining happiness inevitably leads to acknowledgement of the importance of physical, mental and emotional well being and those factors that will lead to inclusion, acceptance, and the ability to participate.

A recent study, *Other People's Children*, conducted into childhood in the United Kingdom (Thomas and Hocking, 2003) acknowledges the limitation of the Convention and makes some alternative and often controversial suggestions. It proposes that a 'quality of life' approach to children will be far more effective than the present fragmented and over legislated system found in the UK, and that quality of life can be defined as a combination of four areas: individual standard of living, shared resources, happiness and emotional well-being and trust and inclusion. Their study is another example of how ideas around childhood are progressing beyond the confines of rights and the concept of childhood as an age of innocence.

Thomas and Hocking suggest that, despite huge progress for many children in terms of medical, health, financial and educational well-being, there have been many casualties as well. A major feature of modern societies, they argue, is that progress has been linked to the increasing prevalence of individualism and that the increasing likelihood of major change (divorce and moving house for example) and greater exposure to different kinds of media have made life more emotionally demanding for children. Although families have adapted to this, other institutions in

society have failed to do so, leading to increased pressure on children, particularly in areas such as educational performance.

The report contends that children are reliant on social capital and informal community networks for their growth and well-being and that, due to increasing individualism and the growing hysteria around issues such as abuse and paedophilia, the likelihood of any shared responsibility for children is greatly decreasing. This work shows that the overall response to change in society has been one of fragmentation, not holism, which is required for quality of life for children. The impact of this fragmentation is expressed in the numerous contradictions of modern society, such as the assumption that paid work for children is frowned upon, while children complete 35 million test papers each year (in the UK), and that there is an increasing reluctance to allow children in public places while obesity goes unchecked.

The report suggests that while a rights based approach to children, childhood and issues affecting children is a good starting point that:

*Drawing up individual entitlements could easily entrench compartmentalised responsibilities for children's lives and encourage a blame and compensation culture. Legal and quasi-legal rights do not necessarily build shared commitment to children or strengthen collective capacity for adapting to wider social and economic change (Thomas and Hocking, 2003 p 13).*

In what might be seen as a radical departure from current thinking about democratic process and childhood, the writers of this report suggest that children need to be seen as an active constituency, not just as silent appendages to their parents, and that the only way in which this will happen is if children are given the

right to vote. The report presents a model for looking at childhood, which may prove valuable in the creation of new models for examining notions of participation. It suggests that a process of 'colonisation' of children's lives (i.e. adult based supervision and agenda setting and influence over children) has been a recent trend that has arisen as a result of 'privatisation, risk aversion and the reach of modern communication' (Thomas and Hocking, 2003 p22). This increases the pressures on children and decreases the amount of self-directed time that children have available, thereby reducing the social capital they are able to develop and reinforcing the gap between adults (other than parents) and children. In turn the responsibility and interaction that adults beyond the immediate family unit have taken for children in the past has greatly diminished – hence children being seen by society as 'other people's children'.

Associated with the decline in community responsibility for children has been a corresponding pressure on parents to deliver the quality of life that was previously, at least in part, a broader community role. This has led to the creation of a vicious circle, whereby parents feel that they must provide more control and take greater responsibility over their children.

In turn, this has led to increasing separation from the broader community (and the social capital for children that those relationships bring) and the growth of the 'privatised culture':

*The overall trend, therefore, is towards a situation in which children and young people are secure only when in functional, supervised environments, which seem in many ways to be increasingly segregated from the rest of society. Children are shunted into specially created*

*'zones' – of which schools are the most potent example – to gain particular kinds of experience. The exclusion of communities extends to the design of buildings: the acceptable venues for children are designed with high walls and locked doors, and are only populated by children and 'authorised' adults (Thomas and Hocking, 2003 p52).*

While focusing on a highly industrialised society, this report provokes some relevant insights into the participation of children more generally. Growing individualism, common in the United Kingdom and other industrialised countries, is not always the case in many developing countries, where traditional community institutions such as the extended family and social and religious bodies, such as the church, mosque, or temple, continue to provide rich networks through which social capital can be developed. Could it also be argued, therefore, that a greater richness of participation, as discussed previously, is commensurate with social capital? Some recent studies would support this hypothesis. Gordon Jack and Bill Jordan (1999), for example, argue that the emphasis of formal child protection and family support services on increasing parenting skills may be counter-productive. They propose that the most effective means of caring for and nurturing children is through the building of social capital; that is, through the cultural resources and inter-personal relationships of the community.

Thomas and Hocking also claim that a child rights approach alone does not provide a framework through which children's access to resources, opportunities or power can be determined. They suggest that a rights-based system runs the risk of creating an overly bureaucratic structure that may raise the profile of children's issues but not equip people to solve them. They acknowledge that there are different kinds of rights all of which are open to interpretation, usually by those in

positions of power. They observe that one of the defining characteristics of childhood is that children are dependent on others for their well being and, therefore, lack power, voice, and status, and are easily ignored or exploited. Finally, they claim that rights-based approach might form a good starting point but that it does not always provide a good working model for intervention.

The report goes on to observe that consultation with children (an element of participation that appears in both Hart and Franklin's models) is not universal and does not always take place in those areas most important or relevant to children (such as in the family or at school) and is not often linked to the exercise of power. It is this last point that is of primary importance in the analysis of participation, at least at a structural level. A key recommendation stemming from the report, designed to give children a greater and more influential vote is that the age of majority be brought in line with the age of criminal responsibility, which in the U.K. is 14 years. This recommendation is made, along with a range of others, based on the quality of life framework and is designed to provide both the space, policy level and structural environment for children to be able to create and maintain social networks of their own and to become active participants in society on their own terms.

This framework (Figure 6 below) bears some similarities to the learner's permit approach advocated by Melton (1999), in which children are allowed to gradually assume independence only after experience in the decision or task has been allowed as with learning to drive. In the case of the Quality of Life Framework, children are supported by high quality and integrated services, safe access to

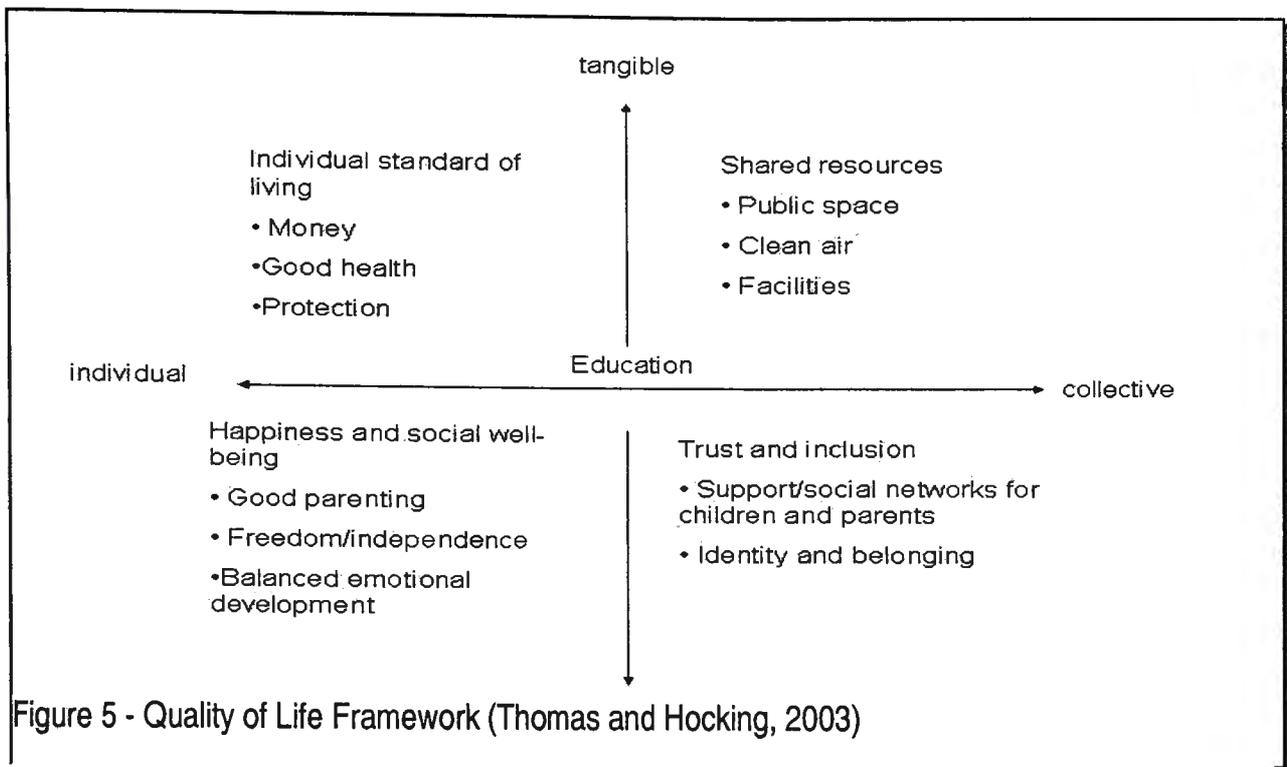


Figure 5 - Quality of Life Framework (Thomas and Hocking, 2003)

public space (including the media) and the freedom to create networks of trust and social support. Such an approach would then allow children to make their own decisions as to when, how and in what they would like to participate.

Despite the focus on children in the U.K., the underlying concept of providing space for children to develop their own social capital and space for participation in society should be seen as fundamental. This does not take place in a linear fashion, as illustrated in the models of Hart and Franklin. Increasing participation must mean, to some degree, moving from a nominal sense to a far more comprehensive state in which children not only make decisions about situations they face but take control of the decision-making process itself. Wyness (2000) contends that the two conflicting paradigms around the status of children have developed around protectionism (based on the idea of children and childhood in a state of crisis) on the one hand and liberation on the other. He argues against the

crisis perspective and suggests a reappraisal of the protectionist relationship between adult and child. However, the reconstructionist critique, he argues:

*does not necessary entail a model of the liberated child. Nor do the possibilities for identifying different models of childhood make the claims for children's formal adult status more compelling...I occupy the middle ground with slight leanings towards loosening the bonds of dependency and patronage....Whilst I do not believe it is desirable or feasible to 'liberate' children, I nevertheless contend that schools, in particular, need to be quite radically restructured with a more democratic, citizen-based ethos (Wyness, 2000 p6).*

## **Conclusion**

The history of the child rights movement and the recent academic theorising around the sociology of childhood raises pertinent considerations regarding participation. Firstly, though the CRC has provided a solid framework and a justification for children's participation, protection has often taken precedence over participation which, due to its controversial nature (VanBueren, 1996), has, until recently, not received sufficient consideration. The CRC itself is, arguably, open to misinterpretation and has at times been seen as an instrument of instilling Western values of the idealised childhood. In the worst case scenario misinterpretation of the CRC could result in political and economic disadvantage for children and see them forced into situations of exploitation, as was the case with the Harkin Bill and its impact on child workers in Bangladesh (discussed previously).

Secondly, new sociological understandings suggest that childhood is not a universal entity. However, while culture must be taken into account in deliberations of children's participation, not all that is culturally legitimised is always in the best interests of the child. Participation based on a strictly cultural interpretation of

childhood is therefore questionable. Thirdly, institutions within society that are established to support and protect children, while in many cases allowing for their growth and protection, are often not integrated and do not intentionally seek to provide space for children to become social actors on their own terms. Finally, society is changing rapidly across the globe, bringing challenges to parents and families and working against the ability of children to develop social capital and to create their own networks through which they might be able to choose where and how they might participate.

Within these growing dilemmas, humanitarian organisations in both the industrialised and the developing world have developed a multitude of ways in which to introduce participatory processes for children. The following section will analyse some of these.

### *What are child participation 'projects'?*

It is clear that participation, now seen as a vital element of community development programs, has complex antecedents and is not easily defined. Increasingly, participation has been seen as an element of the human rights discourse and relates to involvement in democratic decision-making processes. Literature relating to children and participation is a recent, yet growing, body of knowledge. Very much framed within the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the child participation discourse is becoming increasingly recognised in the development world, particularly amongst some of the larger child focussed organisations, such as UNICEF, World Vision and Save the Children. The participation of children as delegates at the United Nations General Assembly on Children, held in 2002, was indicative of this increasing focus.

The different theoretical models presented in the literature review section show a progression in understanding the complex nature of participation, from social, cultural and psychological perspectives. The following section will look at some practical expressions of children's participation.

Broadly speaking participation programs might be understood in the following way:

1. "Child-led" organisations such as the child clubs organised through the Save the Children Alliance in Nepal;
2. Programs focussing on particularly vulnerable groups (such as street and working children or child soldiers) that seek to involve children in a variety of ways;
3. Programs that focus on children as peer educators such as the child to child approach which is being increasingly used in the area of maternal and child health;
4. Mainstream development programs focussing on adults that seek to include children's perspectives;
5. Entire organisations (such as Save the Children, World Vision and PLAN International) that claim to have child focussed or child centred development as its core business.
6. Child participation projects of a global scale such as the Global Movement for Children (led by the UN) and the Children as Partners (CAP) initiative which has been spearheaded by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development based at the University of Victoria in Canada.

The following looks at examples of these projects in a bid to further understand theoretical implications and to assist in the development of a new framework for the analysis of child participation.

### *The child-to-child approach*

The 'child-to-child' approach has been used for some time in the delivery of health education and early childhood learning programs for children and youth. It involves developing the knowledge and skills of older children (between the ages of eight and fifteen) who are in a position of influence over their peers or younger siblings and associates. The approach requires an adult 'initiator', who takes the role of mobilising children's interest, providing training and ongoing mentoring. Initiators are likely to be from health, education and social work fields. Most child-to-child programs originate from the formal school environment, although this is not exclusively the case. Indeed, the increasing number of child headed households as a result of the HIV pandemic (particularly in Africa) has meant that many children are becoming more than just health educators for their younger siblings.

The aim of the approach is to use participatory educational methods and for initiators to 'act as a catalyst to encourage children to help each other and their communities' (Landers, 1988). In other words, initiators are meant to work with children to explore their own health needs and those of their communities and to come up with achievable means through which to meet these needs. Such programs can vary from small group and village level initiatives, involving a handful of children, to much larger (often school based) initiatives, involving many more participants. Landers (1988) has identified a number of factors that characterise successful programs of this sort, that include both local, concerning the interaction

with the child (such as creative teaching methods), to the more global environmental and structural issues, such as the support of relevant ministries and policy makers. She goes on to identify numerous benefits to participants, such as increased knowledge of health and education and improved health practice. An increase in self-esteem of the child teachers was also noted as a benefit to teachers and other initiators who became involved in the programs. Indirect benefits to families and the community, in terms of changed health or cultural practices, have also been observed.

### *Children's involvement in governance and children's parliaments*

The involvement of children in parliament and the creation of children's parliaments, two quite different approaches to involving children in policy level discussion, have both met with mixed results. Perhaps the most notable example of children involving themselves in parliament is that of street children in the Brazilian parliament. Prior to, and following the collapse, of the military dictatorship in the 1980's, the incidence of children on the streets of many Brazilian cities became an increasing concern to government and child rights advocates alike. The 'minor's issue', as it became known, was a result of a number of economic and social factors, not least of which was the economic model of rapid industrialisation prevailing at that time. This prompted rapid urbanisation and concentration of income which, in turn exacerbated poverty levels, seriously impacting on the status of children and young people. Early entry into the labour force, school drop outs all led to in increasing numbers of children taking to the streets (Pangaea Organisation, 1994).

Concern for this situation resulted in the creation of the National Movement for Street Boys and Girls (Swift, 1991), an initiative partially funded by UNICEF and made up of numerous social and religious groups and NGOs, concerned for, and working with, children who had taken to the streets. This movement (led primarily by adult advocates but involving many child and youth representatives) mobilised an incredible public interest in the issue, resulting in the formulation of the children's section of the constitution which was supported by a petition of over 1,000,000 children and adolescents and 200,000 adults (Swift, 1991). The chapter on the rights of children and adolescents was heavily based on the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child<sup>6</sup> and was approved by the Brazilian Constitutional Assembly in May 1988. This was followed by the 'Child and Adolescent Statute' which translated the constitutional amendments regarding children into legislation. The policy level implications emanating from this participatory process was substantial and resulted in moving from a repressive and punitive welfare system to one based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Deweese and Klees, Feb 1995). This, in turn, has led, amongst other things, to the inclusion of children in participatory municipal government. Guerra (2002) describes this process whereby 18 boys and 18 girls have been elected, since 1998, as child councillors to represent children's needs in the development of budget priorities for children. As she observes:

*The elected children learn how to represent their peers within democratic structures, to prioritise based on available resources, and then to develop projects within the complex and often slow political and bureaucratic process of city governance (Guerra, 2002 p 71).*

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<sup>6</sup> Proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 1386(XIV) of 20 November 1959.

Not all experiments involving children in the parliamentary process have been successful however. The Philippines, recognised for its 'people's power', has made a concerted attempt to involve children and youth in Youth Councils, known as 'Sangguniang Kabataan' (SK). These are composed of seven members who are:

*tasked to formulate policies, co-ordinate with appropriate organizations and agencies, and initiate and implement programs and activities designed to enhance the social, political, economic, cultural, intellectual, moral, spiritual and physical development of the youth (Racelis and Aguirre, 2005)*

These SKs have met with mixed results, with the majority not meeting the needs of many children or youth, particularly those not in school. The SKs consist of better educated children and children who are the sons and daughters of privileged families and are often hand picked by adults in position of authority. SK's themselves report having little voice in local government affairs (Racelis and Aguirre, 2005).

#### Child clubs in Nepal

The Children's Clubs of Nepal are a similar but less ambitious attempt at children having a voice in local decision-making. These clubs (supported through Save the Children Norway and U.S. as well as a number of other international organizations) began in the early 1990s, growing out of the child-to-child training programs that took place at a village level. Clubs have a similar structure to other adult village level organizations and have limited adult influence, primarily through a facilitator who assists the club where necessary. This structure includes an executive committee and a number of elected positions as outlined in Figure 7 below.

Club activities vary across a broad range, including development work, play, recreation, national rallies, informal discussion, and song and dance. A survey conducted of these clubs in 1999 (Rajbhandary et al., 1999) found that out of 180, less than ten were completely initiated by children, with most children having little idea about the clubs when they were first introduced to them by an adult in the

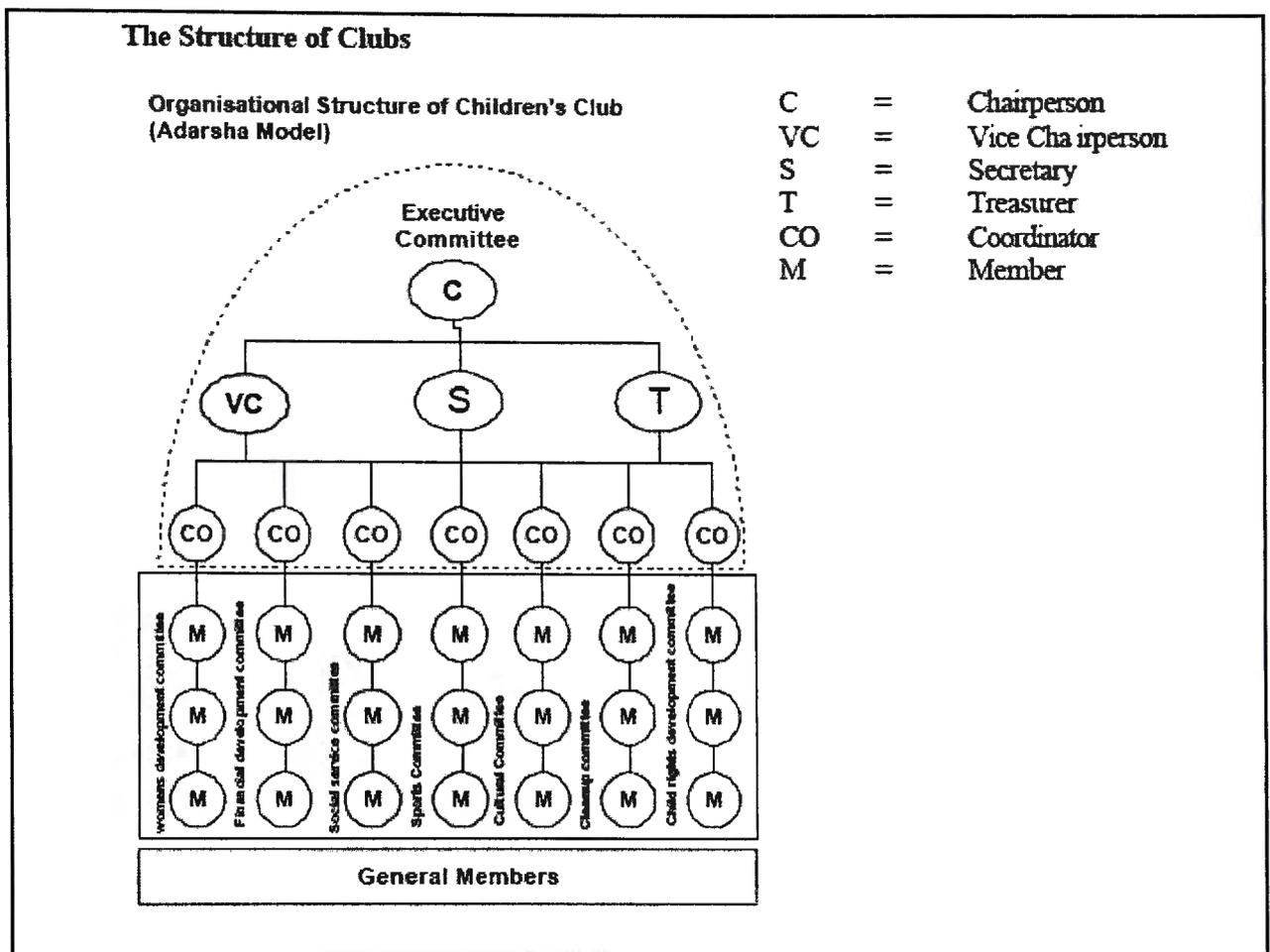


Figure 6 – Structure of Children's Clubs in Nepal

village. The survey found that benefits to the children in the clubs included working cooperatively, practice in decision-making, managing their own organisation and managing relationships in democratic ways. While finding few, if any, negative comments about the clubs from either adults or children, the review made some significant recommendations for change. These included recommendations relating to democratic governance, inclusion of younger children, girls and disabled children and alternative structures to enable greater participation (Rajbhandary et

al., 1999). Overall, however, the clubs were seen as an extremely effective means through which children can participate within the community. Perhaps the major omission of this report was the lack of information about the way in which the clubs influenced the formal decision-making structures of the community, if at all.

### Children as researchers

There has been a growing trend towards including children in research tasks, with the recognition that children are most likely to have the best insights into their own situation. Pole et. al. (1999), studying children's paid work in the U.K., examined the extent to which it was possible to include children in the design and implementation of research. They found that most children who are the subjects of research have little control over how that research is implemented, or in what happens to the findings. They noted that the primary causative factor for this was the failure of adult researchers to take children seriously, due to a concern for lack of academic rigour. Also, similar to the notion of social capital (discussed previously), they suggested that children lacked 'research capital' due to their age and lack of experience.

Since Pole's work there have been significant advances in more inclusive and academically respected participatory research by children. A number of manuals and articles have been written, suggesting how children might be included meaningfully in the research process (e.g. Lyer, 2001, O'Shaughnessy and Dorning, 2001). Kirby (2004) suggests that there are three different types of research approach with children. Firstly, consultation in which children and young people are consulted by researchers. Their perspectives and points of view are taken into account but they are not involved in decision-making processes neither

about the research methodology nor the recommendations. Secondly collaboration in which there is partnership with young people in the research process and the resultant planning based on recommendations. Finally, as 'user-control', in which the power to decide upon the research focus and the subsequent decision-making is with the children and young people themselves. This does not imply that young people control or take part in every stage of the research, nor that 'professional' researchers are excluded from the process altogether (Kirby, 2004).

### Participation in schools

One of the most obvious ways in which children are offered the possibility of participating is through activities in their own schools. Often such participation has taken an environmental focus (Hart, 1997). Both formal and informal education settings have incorporated participative programs. In India, for example, children from St Xavier Night School for Disadvantaged and 'Alor Riday', put into effect a plan to address growing environmental problems in Kolkata (Cook et al., 2004). They confronted the local mayor to ask for dustbins and plants:

*After much confrontation at the mayor's office, the plants and dustbins were given to us. We then planted the trees and now they have become large and they will clean the air...we found appropriate places [for the bins] and now everyone in the slum community uses these dustbins instead of the ground (Cook et al., 2004 p 27).*

There appears to have been some genuine, albeit modest, progress made in integrating some participatory involvement of children in Vietnamese schools through what has become known as the 'child friendly schools and neighbourhoods program' (Beers et al., 2006). However, despite considerable investment in

encouraging participation, and along similar lines as findings relating to the child clubs in Nepal, a recent review of these programs found that:

*Children's participation is regarded as a children's activity – not related to adults' participation rights – since (thus far) there is no evidence of shared (adult-child) participation. Nevertheless, it is stated by many that children should be involved in adult organizations (but with some caveats) (Beers et al., 2006 p 137).*

#### Global initiatives for participation

Beyond these more localised projects, there have recently emerged a number of international child participation initiatives. The Children as Partners (CAP) network is one of the largest of these. Born in Canada as an initiative of the International Institute for Child Rights and Development, it began with a meeting of international NGO representatives (including Save the Children, World Vision and Plan International), academics, child rights advocates, politicians and members of the UN Committee of the Rights of the Child. The aim was to create an international network to support partnerships between children and other children, children's organisations and youth organisations, adult organisations and children's organisations, adult workers and children's groups, children and their parents, and community groups and children. To date there have been two international workshops, bringing together adults and children from different organisations around the world (including UNICEF and a number of the larger child focussed NGOs). An interactive website has been established, and a number of publications produced, around the issue of participation.

Another international children's initiative, The Global Movement for Children, was launched during the UN General Assembly Special Session on children (May

2002). Both have included children's participation. The UN Special Session was the first occasion on which the General Assembly solely discussed children and the first time in which children were members of official delegations as representatives of both government and non-government organisations (UNICEF, 2003b). The lead up to the Special Session which was conducted over a number of years, included regional consultations to which child delegations (sometimes elected) from different countries gathered together to give input. The process that led up to the Special Session and the impact the presence of children had on the Special Session itself is reflected in the words of Kofi Annan quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Emanating from the Special Session was a commitment by government signatories to work with children in the development of national plans of action for realising the CRC. The ongoing process of the development and implementation of Plans of Action has met with mixed results and, in most cases, is too early for any systematic analysis of the outcomes. It is not mandatory for countries to include children in these discussions, nor is there a specific process, although guidelines have been produced by Save the Children for this purpose (Save the Children, 2002).

Most recently the UN initiated study on violence against children (Pinheiro, 2006) encouraged NGO and civil society organisations to engage children<sup>7</sup> in a world wide study in to the effects of domestic violence against children. This study, commissioned by the United Nations General Secretary aimed to better understand

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<sup>7</sup> Even though one aim of the study was to engage children as participants, the degree to which that took place was varied. To illustrate this, the author was contracted to assist World Vision in the Pacific in developing a participative research methodology and to coordinate data collection and analysis in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu for the UN study. Despite the participative plan, time constraints limited participation. To generalize about the participative nature of the entire study is therefore problematic.

and seek solutions for all forms of violence against children in the context of family, school, care and residential institutions as well as detention facilities and prisons, in work situations, and in communities and on the streets . A range of cross cutting issues featured including trafficking and exploitation, refugees, separated and internally displaced children, and children affected by HIV. Children affected by armed conflict were not covered in this report.

#### *From child participation projects to child participation theory*

The factors that influence the potential for children's meaningful participation are complex. Likewise, the results of participatory activities have shown mixed efficacy. Cook et al. (2004) suggest that while children participate with or without the assistance of others, the key to successfully engaging children in participatory conferences or projects or policy discussion is a sense of partnership. This is dependent on a number of factors, including the development of trusting and nurturing relationships, a child's own agency, supportive social and environmental circumstances that allow for dialogue, addressing of power imbalances between adults and children and the opportunity for children to affect change as a result of their involvement (Cook et al., 2004). These thoughts are echoed by Johnson (1998) who suggests also that transparency and confidentiality in interactions between children and adults are vital.

A growing focus on evaluation and monitoring of the impact of development programming has seen a corresponding growth in evaluation of children's participation. Joachim Theis (2004), for example, suggests that children's participation must be viewed as a process, rather than an activity and that organisations seeking to involve children should develop a 'culture of participation'.

This culture is characterised by an increasing involvement of children following a number of steps. Children are consulted and listened to; children are involved in some decisions; children are involved in all decisions that affect them; children and adults share decision-making power and responsibility; children make their own decisions and are supported by adults (Theis, 2004). The framework itself is not markedly different to Hart and Franklin's models (discussed previously). It is linear and progresses towards children taking control and is very strongly regulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Perhaps more beneficial, however, are what Theis suggests to be underlying principles of participation. Organisations should strive to be transparent, honest, democratic and voluntary. They should aim for equality, inclusion and non-discrimination. They should create child-friendly environments (that is organisational structures, rules and systems that are easy for children to understand and operate within). Theis also notes that participation should be relevant to the age and maturity of the child and should enhance the child's personal development. Child protection and safety should be ensured and staff should be competent in dealing with children and that follow up and feedback with children should be integral to any involvement. He does not address the issue of proper representation, however, and who decides how, when and where children are represented and in what manner. Neither does he provide clarity on the cultural dynamics of children and childhood and how they might affect participation.

Michael Wyness (2001) contends that children's lack of ontological status relegates them to the realm of family, intimacy and emotion and they are, therefore, devoid of social significance. Based on an assessment of young people's councils, he

suggests that children's interests can be analysed around four areas; mobilisation of children's interests in organisational terms, participation during which time children get involved in political structures of the organisation, influence where children are able to influence decisions affecting them and representation where children become directly responsible for organisational matters and through which we can identify organisational commitment to participation. These broader categories allow for variation in cultural and other dimensions (lacking in the Theis framework above) and, most importantly, for the development of less prescriptive narratives around areas of participation. However the basis for the four categories remains essentially a Western rights-based model in which formal political structures are the fundamental means through which participation should be analysed.

A further alternative is suggested by Tolfree (1998), who classifies participation in terms of three areas, consultation where children's views are sought, allowing them their voice in actions affecting them; organisation where children themselves organise actions and events and protagonism where children act as advocates on their own behalf. Theis (2004) suggests a similar three categories: consultation, representation and inclusion and inclusive decision-making and empowerment. These recent conceptualisations articulate a more nuanced understanding of participation than do older models such as Hart and Franklin's. However, they focus on decision-making as a key indicator of children's involvement and, therefore, risk ignoring contemporary theoretical perspectives of the sociology of childhood.

The benefits of participating are many: new skills, increased influence, shared responsibility and the opportunity to contribute are just a few. Kim Sabo (2001) in reflecting on the benefits of participation for children and youth, suggests that two key benefits stood out from her own work in this field. Firstly, that young people began to see themselves as agents for social change, and, secondly, that there was a feeling of increased ownership over the program. She suggests also that although the benefits of participation are often seen as gains to the individual (new skills, feeling of empowerment or the growth in self-esteem for example) that the greatest benefit lies in the possibility of new relationship that might form between children and adults and with each other. As one of the children with whom she worked said:

*It was cool we did a lot, we learned a lot, we're doing a lot of learning. A lot of leaning about each other...and we learn from both sides because we do have adults in there, so we're seeing it from both sides. You know, sometimes we agree, sometimes we disagree, but there is always a respectful way, you know what I'm saying? (Sabo, 2001 p 51).*

## *Overall conclusions*

The first section of this chapter looked in detail at definitions of participation within the context of community development. Inherent within the discourse of participation is the underlying philosophy that people have a right to make their own choices. In the past, human rights discourses have often ignored the reality for people in communities, and participatory development approaches have ignored the structural rights issues that limit systemic and sustainable change. Many rights based approaches to development have focussed on legalistic interventions and failed to understand the reality of people's situations and how

rights might be understood within them. They take a legalistic starting point to people's problems, whereas good development practice, in contrast, takes people's experience as the catalyst for change. However in recent years, as a result of deepening inequality, poverty and the realisation that both development and rights need to work in greater harmony, there has been a growing convergence between the two. This has led to a recognition that both discourses could benefit from a more thorough appreciation of each other's theoretical and practical approaches (VeneKlasen et al., 2004). From this we can conclude that good development and a respect for human rights should go hand in hand.

As the key human rights document relating to children, the CRC has been of immense value. Many governments have used the document to develop plans for the development and inclusion of child focussed agendas within systems of national planning. However, the CRC is not without difficulties. Apparent ambiguities within the CRC such as the protection-participation dilemma as well as definitional concepts such as the 'best interest' of the child may actually serve to undermine children's rights. In addition, although key concepts of the CRC, such as the best interest clause, could be seen as an underlying call for all concerned with children to actively engage in dialogue around such issues, this presupposes supportive and safe structures and institutions within society.

Rights can appear individualistic and could undermine existing structures of traditional societies (including those associated with social capital), in which children often play a vital role. Many children in the developing world, although they may have little voice in overt decision-making, do play a major role in their

homes, either through caring for siblings, working around the home, or working to bring in some income for the household. However, such participation does not always give children the voice in matters affecting them, that the CRC espouses, and risks being undervalued or ignored by child rights policy and practice.

Child Rights have, in some instances, become a tool for the globalisation of a particular concept of childhood. Bissell (2003) notes that globalisation has led, not only to the expansion of economic markets but also to the export of the ideal of innocence of childhood. She suggests that globalisation is largely economic in nature and that the globalisation of childhood is a part of that much broader economic rationale. Within that, international treaties, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are at risk of becoming a tool for those who would seek to maintain economic and political dominance.

As a result of the Child Rights 'movement', many forms of child participation projects have emerged and, no doubt, will continue to grow and develop in number and sophistication. The different strands of literature reviewed in this chapter, along with a brief look at some types of participation projects, provide a number of 'markers' that help to identify factors that might assist children's participation and, possibly, provide some guiding principles for future development.

Firstly, it is vital to recognise that participation does not just take place in projects run by NGOs, governments, school or community programs. Such programs do not have a monopoly on children nor ownership over children's ability nor their interest in participating. If we are to accept that children have agency, that they

can be social actors in their own right, then situations must be created to allow children to participate of their own volition and in areas of interest to them.

Secondly, children must be allowed to create their own social space and to develop their own social capital. Denying them this means reducing the possibilities of their participation. If children are to create their own social space they must be able to form relationships with adults as well as with other children, so that they are not viewed simply as “other people’s children”. As children are allowed to develop their own social capital they become better to play a role in bridging different social contexts. This should be acknowledged as an important form of participation.

Thirdly, if children are to be encouraged to develop their own agency and social capital, there needs to be sufficient inbuilt mechanisms of protection to prevent harm and abuse. This is a major challenge for society and one that has no easy solutions. However, the increasing isolation of children into walled institutions and under the constant vigilance of parents who are too scared to let their children out of their sight will continue to ‘disempower’ children and will decrease the likelihood of their participation.

Fourthly, it is important to recognise that children have expertise on matters that affect them. This is not to deny an adult’s perspective but simply to state that the ability of children to understand their own circumstances should not be underestimated and that, as a matter of plain logic, it makes sense to seek children’s opinions.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that there is a vast array of factors that might affect the way in which children can participate. Very broadly, these relate to the individual child, to the political environment and to the cultural and social environment in which the children live. Participation initiatives must seek to take all these factors into account, as they are developed.

## Children in Burma: Social, Political and Economic Context

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### *Introduction*

This chapter will provide an overview on the limited literature concerning children in contemporary Burma. The review will draw on the recent and historical texts, along with reports from the UN and from other international organisations and various worldwide web resources. It will consider Burmese childhood from various perspectives, to gain a contextual understanding of the broader political environment that governs policy and practice around children and childhood.

#### *Childhood in Burma*

The few publications on Burmese childhood, written by Burmese and accessible in English, paint quite an idyllic childhood in which children are often allowed great freedoms until they reach puberty, at which time they are sent to monasteries where they are disciplined and educated (Khine, 1945). On the other hand, the existing (limited) body of Western research into Burmese childhood often paints quite a contradictory picture. Studies conducted by British and American psychologists and anthropologists during the 1940s to 1960s characterised Burmese parents as 'monsters', using a mixture of violence, threats, repression and deception to bring up their children (Skidmore, 2005).

There are undoubtedly elements of truth at both ends of this spectrum, and the reality for life of children in Burma today is highly complex, extremely challenging,

often tragic, and cannot be seen through any single perspective. Skidmore (2005), in her article the 'Future of Burma: Children are Like Jewels', brings a welcome insight into this complexity. She traces the evolution of modern academic involvement in the understanding of Burmese childhood and points out that much of the early 'Western' view was often poorly researched. Biased and extreme views, such as the alleged link between a hypothesised lack of good parenting and loving family relationships and the growth of the revolutionary and nationalistic movements of the mid 1900's (as claimed by Pye, 1962) have resulted. An alternative view of child socialisation is presented by Skidmore, based on contemporary research amongst Burmese women. She articulates a rich tapestry of religious (Buddhist) and cultural nuances that form the basis of Burmese childhood and she warns of the growing influence of the modern world, complete with fast food chains and corporate consumer culture. Refuting the often negative vestiges of past research, she concludes that to many Burmese, children are seen as the future, and are often referred to as jewels, both in name<sup>8</sup> and in metaphor:

*Children are consistently compared to jewels because of their rareness, preciousness, and because of their need to be protected or watched over' (Skidmore, 2005 p 376).*

In a 'representational' sense she notes that children are often valued as coming from the blood of the mother (yin-thway – breast blood) or from the bone marrow of the father. She concludes that children are invariably seen as or 'represent' a parent's greatest asset and as an integral component of their future:

*When asked the question, 'What are children?' Burmese people will overwhelmingly answer, 'Children are the future.' Children represent the strength of the present and past generations made manifest, and they are bundles of potentiality.....U Chit Phyto answered the question*

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<sup>8</sup> Many Burmese names contain words for precious stones or silver and gold

*by stating, 'I think it's obvious. They are my heritage. They are a part of me and they are my success. I am a happy man now. My grand children are wonderful as well. I cannot ask for more.'* (Skidmore, 2005 p 260)

However, notwithstanding the love and affection that Burmese have for their children, the predicament of most children in Burma is dire and the military regime has created an environment in which quality of life has seriously deteriorated over recent years. Preventable diseases such as diarrhoea, respiratory illness, dysentery, typhoid, malaria and tetanus are the leading causes of morbidity and mortality and TB infection rates are rising. Four percent of new patients are presenting with multi-drug resistant TB, and the national figures report an increase in HIV-TB co-infection and an increase in children with TB, including TB/HIV co-infection (Myanmar Ministry of Health, 2006).

### *The dominance of the state*

No critique of Burma would be complete without a thorough understanding of the ruling military regime, and the 'politics of power' that governs the way in which people live their lives and shapes their perceptions. Understanding power in Burma is at the same time illusory yet imperative. Foucault's metaphor of power, being exercised through a net-like organisation, (as described in Chapter Two) is an apt description of what takes place in Burma. The government's tentacles reach out at many levels, reinforcing its hegemony in both subtle and overt ways. To analyse any aspect of life in Burma today, including the experience of childhood, requires an understanding of military rule and the impact that this has had on communities and

individuals, as well as on the traditional belief systems and behavioural norms that form Burmese culture.

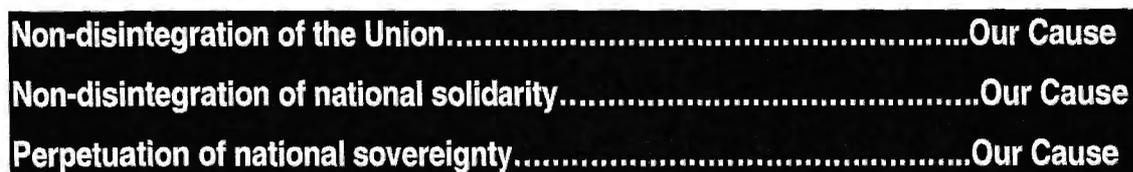
To a significant degree all that the military junta does must be considered fundamentally illegitimate. Following its refusal to allow the legally elected government to take the reigns of government following the elections of 1990 they usurped control from the popularly elected government. This was hardly surprising to many 'Burma watchers', as the political history of the country is mired with conspiracy, intrigue and power plays. George Orwell (1934) introduced the English speaking world to the complexity of Burmese politics, in his fictional description of U Po Kyin, a magistrate in upper Burma who:

*...even for the vastest bribe would never sell the decision of a case, because he knew that a magistrate who gives wrong judgements is caught...his practice, a much safer one, was to take bribes from both sides and then decide on the case on strictly legal grounds...he was too absorbed in intrigue ever to fail through carelessness or ignorance (p 6).*

Not long after Orwell's book was published, actual political intrigue swept the country, with the assassination of General Aung Sang and of a number of his colleagues, just prior to independence in 1948. There is still uncertainty as to who was really behind the murders (Kin Oung, 1993). More recently there was the arrest and detainment of General Ne Win (along with a number of his family members on the 4<sup>th</sup> March 2002). He was the ruler of the country throughout the Burmese socialist period that ended with the pro-democracy uprisings of 1988. He was detained by the very generals whom he had nurtured and, following his official 'retirement' from power, supported from behind. General Khin Nyunt, former Prime

Minister and head of military intelligence, followed not long after (on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 2004). He was arrested for corruption and is now serving a lengthy term under house arrest. He was not quite as careful as Orwell's fictional U Po Kyin!

To the present military leaders of the country there is logic in such behaviour. Pedersen (2004) argues that ideas of national sovereignty and national unity are the two underlying concepts that guide the regime. This has resulted in xenophobia, as well as a mistrust of any internal element that might influence political stability. The term 'axe handles' is used to describe Burmese nationals who wish to cause unrest; the wood from the tree being used to attack the very tree from whence it came. National unity is 'advertised' everywhere. The three main national causes are posted on bright red signboards around the country:



**Non-disintegration of the Union.....Our Cause**  
**Non-disintegration of national solidarity.....Our Cause**  
**Perpetuation of national sovereignty.....Our Cause**

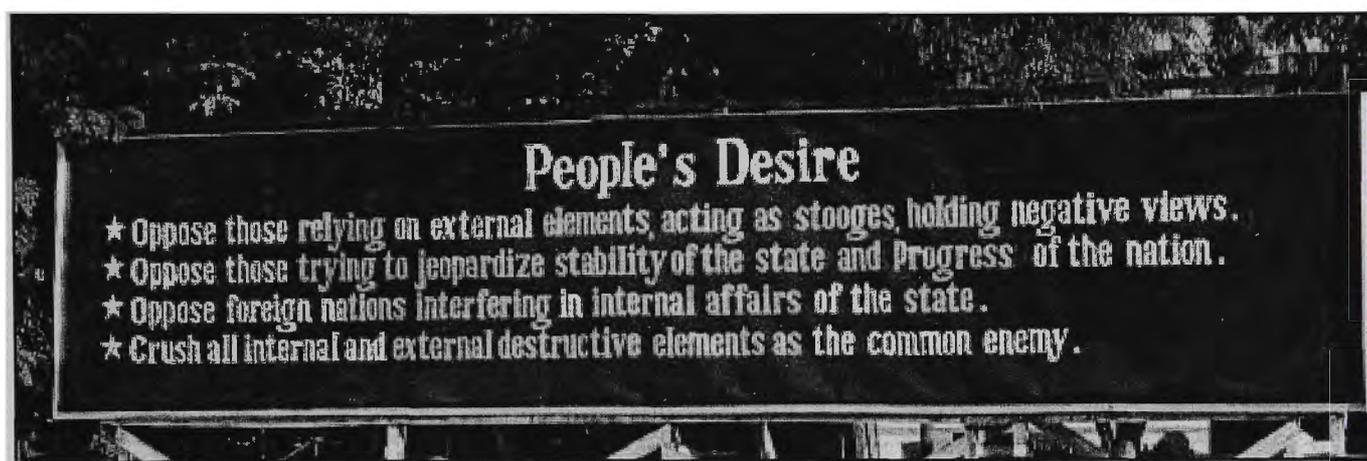
Figure 7 - The 3 National Causes of the Union of Myanmar

Pedersen (2004) suggests that this has replaced the previous socialist ideology and provides the military with a rationale for their ongoing role in civilian government as well as a justification by which any one in opposition can be seen as an enemy of the state.

The national causes have been augmented by a series of 12 objectives for political, economic and social reform (see Appendix 3). They stress the importance of the political stability of the union, in a manner reminiscent of Mao's China: '*Stability of the State, community peace and tranquillity, prevalence of law and order*'.

Economically, they advocate a state controlled market economy and socially for the 'uplifting' of the collective morality. Not only do these signboards appear around the country but they are also in the beginning of every school text book, in every newspaper and beamed over television and the radio. They urge the people to keep the peace by putting their trust in the state.

There are many other popular signboards that communicate something of the mindset of the military regime. One of them, *The People's Desire* (Picture 1 below), has been erected in the downtown area directly opposite the US Embassy.



Picture 1 - The People's Desire

The confrontational and threatening 'People's Desire' can generally be seen alongside the 12 national objectives. Together these overt statements of military authority provide the government with a blue print for the development of the country with a *raison d'être* for its continuing grip on power.

The armed forces, known in Burmese as the '*Tatmadaw*', are the ultimate tool of state control. There have been many widely published examples of the extent to which the military will go in order to maintain their control. The massive and violent

repression of pro-democracy supporters in 1988 culminated in tens of thousands of killed. More recently, the 2004 attack on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters in Depayin resulted in numerous deaths, in the detainment of Suu Kyi (and many of her party members) and in her return to house arrest. The military presence is ubiquitous and is a constant reminder to the populace that the country is under authoritarian rule. It has increased substantially from the 168 battalions used to quash demonstrators in 1988 (Fink, 2001). As reported by the Democratic Voice of Burma:

*Military observers estimate the strength of the current SPDC army which consists of 12 regional military commands and 10 divisions to be about 350,000 active personnel. To give the correct number of battalions, there are 329 Light Infantry Battalions and 197 Infantry Battalions and each battalion consists of between 500 and 700 men. Furthermore, experts pointed out that with other support and logistics battalions including 12 Military Intelligence battalions, 27 communications battalions, 55 artillery battalions, 55 engineering battalions, transport and other logistics support battalions, plus the Navy and the Air Force combined, the total strength could well exceed 400,000 men (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2004).*

Different reports estimate that spending on the military accounts is up to half of the national budget (Heppner, 2002). There is no obvious reason to have a military of such strength, as Myanmar is not threatened by its relations with its neighbours. Rather, the presence of this overwhelming military force is directed internally, to ensure the three 'causes' and the first political objective of a 'unified sovereign state with law and order prevailing'.

### *Big brother is watching*

George Orwell may well have been looking into the future of Burma when he wrote his novel, '1984'. The State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC's) scrutiny of its citizens is ever present and invasive. While the technology for surveillance is not always sophisticated, it is highly effective. Integral to the SPDC structure is a leadership hierarchy that devolves from national, to state and division, to township, to village, and finally, to ten household level. This mechanism is particularly strong in the central Burman heartland, although weaker in some of the outlying states. It is tempered by the presence of various ethnic armies and cease-fire groups that maintain a certain degree of control and autonomy. It is the responsibility of the 10-household leaders to report anything that might seem irregular, and so on, up the chain of command. This system enables the constant monitoring of activities within a household and promotes a sense of mistrust and apprehension<sup>9</sup>.

In addition to the SPDC, there are a variety of other mechanisms of surveillance. 'Military Intelligence' and the 'Special Branch' (MI and SB as they are known) are two of a number of 'intelligence' agencies that regularly scrutinise the day to day activities of Burmese people. There are a host of others; local government organised NGOs (GONGOs, as they are called within the international community, and which will be discussed in detail further on), the Rangoon City Development Council responsible for enforcing city bylaws, the police and even the traffic police. Together, they create an intricate web of surveillance and a state of constant vigilance in which little goes unnoticed.

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<sup>9</sup> Some years ago, a Burmese colleague of mine who worked in the border area and became involved at a superficial level with an anti-government movement, travelled to Rangoon to attend a work meeting. His parents, who lived in the capital, and were concerned that the authorities might have found out about his covert activities, reported him to the police. He was arrested and sentenced to five years jail.

As well as these human surveillance mechanisms, there are many other forms of scrutiny. All citizens are required to carry a national registration card (NRC) recording name, sex, age and date of birth, birth-place, nationality, residence and marital status. Failure to produce an NRC could result in fines and imprisonment. However, many Burmese citizens do not have an NRC and, therefore, are constantly vulnerable to harassment and discrimination. The card is of particular importance to children as it is officially required for parents to enrol their children at school. Without an NRC it is impossible to hold a job that provides anything more than a daily wage. They are required for all matters of bureaucracy and they acknowledge one's existence. Understanding the complexity around the outwardly simple process of acquiring an NRC illustrates the ultimate power and control of the state. Once a child is born, the birth should be registered and a birth certificate issued. This must be done at a government hospital and with the local authorities. A child's name must then be entered onto the family registration list. Upon reaching the age of 12 a temporary NRC is issued, following presentation of the birth certificate and the household list. At the age of 18 a full NRC is issued. The process on paper appears quite straightforward, however, in reality, it is far from so. In the first place, access to a government hospital or clinic is impossible for many communities and many children are born only with the assistance of a traditional midwife. For a child to obtain an NRC, parents must have the necessary documentation or they must return to their birth place to get a copy of their birth certificate and their family registration, assuming that their own birth was registered in the first place. If families have moved, their family registration must be transferred to their new township<sup>10</sup>. The table below (Figure 9) presents statistics

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted too that many people live in little more than straw huts with little if any storage space

	State/ Division	Birth is Registered	birth is not registered because:					total	
			must travel too far	did not know it should be registered	too busy	cost too much	others		reason did not know
<b>Region</b>	Kachin	73.1	1.2	8	6	0.4	1.4	3.7	100
	Kayah	45.8	0.8	33.5	6.7	1.3	1.3	6.2	100
	Kayin	34.8	1.9	42.2	6.1	0.1	1.3	4.2	100
	Chin	47.1	2.8	26.1	10.8	0.9	1.7	8.1	100
	Mon	72.9	0.1	13.9	5.2	0.5	2.1	1.3	100
	Rakhine	54.2	3.1	21.4	9	2.4	7.1	0	100
	Shan (North)	64.1	4.9	11.4	7.4	2.2	0.4	4.7	100
	Shan (East)	48.1	3.9	28.2	6.1	0.4	0.8	2.6	100
	Shan (South)	55.4	0.8	27.3	6.1	0.4	3.2	3.2	100
	Ayeyarwady	53.3	0.8	20.3	10.5	0.8	1.5	1.7	100
	Bago (East)	54.4	1.4	11.7	16.3	1.2	6	5.4	100
	Bago (West)	63	1.2	14.9	9.9	2.1	3.8	0.2	100
	Magway	64.7	2.7	12.9	9.2	0.4	1.9	2.3	100
	Mandalay	73.8	2	9.8	5.3	1.2	4.7	1.1	100
	Sagging	92.8	0	9.7	1.6	0	2.4	1.4	100
	Tanintharyi	92.5	0.5	1.9	3.7	1	0.2	0	100
	Yangon	87.8	0.7	0.4	5.7	1.8	0.9	0.4	100
<b>Area</b>	Urban	88.2	0.6	0.7	5.9	1.5	1.6	0.2	100
	Rural	58.7	1.7	4.5	8	0.8	3	2.6	100
<b>Sex</b>	Male	68.1	1.4	3.4	7.2	1	2.7	1.9	100
	Female	63.7	1.5	4	7.9	1	2.8	2.3	100
<b>Age</b>	<6 months	59	2.4	3.4	12.2	0.7	5	2.2	100
	6-11 months	62.7	1.4	4.4	9.5	1.2	2.8	1.6	100
	12-23 months	64.7	1.4	3.8	8.2	0.9	2.8	2.5	100
	24-35 months	65	1.4	3.6	7.5	0.9	2.3	2.1	100
	36-47 months	66.8	1.5	3.3	5.6	1.1	2.9	1.8	100
	48-59 months	67.2	1	3.8	5.7	0.9	1.7	2.4	100
	Below primary	43.9	2.6	5.5	6.2	1.7	4.5	4.1	100
<b>Mother's education level</b>	Primary	62	1.5	4.3	8.3	1.1	2.8	2.4	100
	Secondary +	77.3	1.1	2.1	6.9	0.4	2	0.8	100
<b>Total</b>		64.9	1.5	3.7	7.6	1	2.7	2.1	100

source: Survey data from Department of Health Planning.

Figure 8 - Survey data on birth registration from the Department of Health Planning

on birth registration from the Myanmar Department of Health Planning. It shows that in ethnic states (apart from Kachin State), birth registration is very low (around 50%). This is not particularly surprising given the history of armed conflict in many of these areas. However, some central Burman areas, notable Ayerawaddy and Bago (East), which are but a few hours drive from Rangoon, show similar statistics. Given the lack of credible data from Burma and that government figures are often manipulated to show a more favourable situation (Falco, 2003), these are likely to be conservative estimates and the actual number of unregistered births to be much higher. If we are to accept the government data, however, this means still that 35% of the population in Burma is not registered.

and the added challenge of extreme heat and extended rainy periods making the storage of documents extremely difficult.

Political control is also expressed through propaganda. It is everywhere, although often so blatant as to be unbelievable. In addition to the government sponsored billboards discussed previously, the media is strictly controlled by the state, as the following excerpt from the New Light of Myanmar (Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2004) illustrates:

*The Union is the foundation for the National Convention. The delegates attending the Convention are the brethren of a single family, who will live in the nation in weal or woe or through thick and thin. They are collectively striving and making coordination for the emergence of a State Constitution, while bearing in mind Union Spirit, loving kindness, sympathy, forgiveness, and the spirit to rejoice at others success or prosperity. Moreover, they are striving in accord with the six objectives of the National Convention — non-disintegration of the Union; non-disintegration of national solidarity; perpetuation of sovereignty; flourishing of a genuine multiparty democracy system; further burgeoning of the noblest and worthiest of worldly values namely justice, liberty and equality in the State; and for the Tatmadaw<sup>11</sup> to be able to participate in the national political leadership role of the State .*

Skidmore (2004) notes the similarities of the use of propaganda in Burma with that of other fascist regimes that used existing myths and stereotypes, such as the unity of the state and the onward march of national progress, to mobilise popular support. Simultaneously, the underlying message of such myth is designed to ensure that the masses recognise their own (lowly) place within the hierarchy of the structure of the state, 'seeking legitimacy from some gut feeling held by Burmese about their place in the world ' (Skidmore, 2004 p 99).

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<sup>11</sup> The Tatmadaw is the Burmese military forces.

It is difficult to gauge the true impact of propaganda. Definitely within the more educated strata of society in Rangoon, there appears to be an unspoken, and sometimes overt, contempt of the regime's attempts to impose itself. This observation was reflected very strongly in the empirical data collected for this thesis, as will be discussed in Chapters Five and Six. However, in the countryside, where people do not have access to education and there has been limited external influence, it is reasonable to expect that government propaganda might receive a greater degree of acceptance.

### *Responding to fear*

Understandably, most people in Burma do not become overtly involved in politics. Yet the situation described above would suggest that no one really escapes the 'net-like' power of the regime. After spending many years in Burma, it seems that there is a political sub-theme to any event, even if it is a choice made not to be political. Dealing with this environment on a day to day basis is a challenge for every Burmese citizen and it leads one to question how people cope when there is no obvious solution in sight.

Fink (2001), in her book *Living Silence*, refers to the 'collective amnesia' of parents who raise their children to

*...conform and even to become part of the system.....In order to protect their children, many parents discourage them from critically examining military rule (Fink, 2001 p101).*

Not all Burma scholars entirely accept this perspective however. Skidmore (2005), for example, suggests that the home is the last bastion of defence from the regime and within the privacy afforded by this space, that children continue to learn a '*soft and quiet form of resistance*', promulgated through the teaching of values directly in contrast to those of the authoritarian state. There is, most likely, a degree of truth to each viewpoint and, on a daily basis, there are many small examples of both defiance and submission, illustrating the multiplicity of ways in which Burmese people deal with circumstances that are ultimately beyond their control. For example, each 8<sup>th</sup> August many Burmese don the traditional longyi (sarong) of the NLD, to commemorate the student uprisings of 1988.

### Civil Society

Another way in which individuals and groups are beginning to actively reclaim power from the regime is through social engagement. Despite the seemingly overwhelming and increasing presence of the military, since 1992 there has been a growth of what could be considered civil society organisations. Civil society can be defined as:

*. . . an intermediate realm situated between state and household, populated by organised groups or associations which are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in relations with the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests, values or identities (Manor et al., 1999 p 4-5).*

Civil society in Burma has been identified as the means through which long-term political change might be achieved (Steinberg, 2006, Skidmore, 2005, Dorning, 2006, Purcell, 1999). In the Burmese language there is no direct translation of 'civil

society', nor is there an indigenous translation of its conceptual nature, as defined above (Steinberg, 2006). There are, however, a broad range of community groups, although it is difficult to estimate their number and be totally sure of their character. As the term is used today in the context of international development in Burma, civil society generally refers to groups that have taken on a role of social concern. This includes a diverse range of activity including funeral services, child care centres and orphanages, homes for the aged and free clinics.

Civil society can be seen either as the result of social capital or, conversely, as its origin. Either way, civil society has begun, usually surreptitiously, to fill the gaps in the delivery of goods and services that otherwise might be the role of the state. It also, at least theoretically, contributes to pluralism, diversity and democracy (Steinberg, 2006). Civil society groups work with a low profile, as many are not registered and members therefore run the risk of fines or imprisonment.

Some civil society groups have been established around specific areas of concern, such as Pyi Gyi Khin, a recently founded local NGO that focuses on women and health, particularly HIV. Others have a far longer history and are substantial in size such as the Muslim Free Hospital in Rangoon. Still others are small home based concerns that care for orphaned or neglected children. A recent publication (International Non-Government Organisations Working in Myanmar, 2004) listed sixty-two local NGOs in Rangoon alone. They were working in a range of areas, some with a practical, more welfare oriented approach and others with more a process-oriented approach, focussing on issues such as capacity-building and non-

violence. The table (Table 2) below gives a summary of the number of groups and the focus of their work:

<b>Focus</b>	<b>Number of Organisations</b>
Agriculture	11
Capacity building	5
Credit	10
Education	31
Environment	8
Health	25
HIV prevention and care	14
non-violence	1
Nutrition	7
Other	8
Religious based	20
Social welfare	20
Water & Sanitation	15

Table 3 – Local NGOs in Yangon and their area of focus (International Non-Government Organisations Working in Myanmar, 2004)

Religious groups generally form an active part of civil society and this is particularly so in Burma. Buddhism, in its many and varied expressions, is an overpowering presence throughout the country. It permeates almost everything in its external, physical existence through the thousands of pagodas, monasteries, shrines, monuments, artefacts, religious orders, festivals and rituals. It has a subliminal presence also. There is a rich discourse that constructs the lived experience of so many Burmese and strongly influences the way in which people relate to each other. During the Bagan Era, from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the influence of Buddhism grew substantially, resulting in a great interest in learning about the religion, along with the growth of monastic schools which were designed to promulgate the teachings of the Buddha (Bischoff, 1995). At this time, the role of children and youth became central as they attended the monastic schools, learnt about Buddhism, law and governance, and, in turn, passed this knowledge on to their parents.

Buddhism, therefore, is a long-term, integral part of the lives of many Burmese and, as the following chapters will show, has a substantive influence on children and childhood. However, not only does the military regime impose itself on the lives of individual citizens of the state, but it has also sought to systematically subvert key Buddhist structures and belief systems. Schober (2005) asserts that religious reforms during the colonial period sought to separate Buddhist culture from the influence of traditional, mythical, cosmological and ritual aspects of its past. Simultaneously, the sangha (the monastic order), was reordered to reflect this reformation. The present regime, she suggests:

*Seek to institute a scripturalist, otherworldly, non-political, and centralized sangha that can be entrusted with legitimating the fundamentalist religion promoted by the state (Schober, 2005 p 117).*

In essence, the regime has attempted to colonise Buddhist expression through the control of the sangha and their own patronage of religious sites and revered monks. They have systematically attempted to remove, or co-opt from the monastic domain, all aspects of social and political involvement, apart from their own.

Other smaller and less established civil society groups have met worse fates. Since the recent political changes resulting in the removal of the previous Prime Minister, Khin Nyunt, the new military leadership has become highly suspicious of any community group that it has not officially sanctioned. Increasingly civil society is being drawn more conclusively under the auspices of the regime or simply closed down. The case of *Shwe Na Lone Thar* (Golden Hearts Health Care Team) is a

disquieting illustration of the growth and demise of a local organisation<sup>12</sup>. This small community organisation was initiated five or six years ago by a group of three or four men who met regularly at a local tea shop in a town in the dry zone, just north of Mandalay. Noticing a lack of care for the sick and dying in the hospital, they decided to forgo their daily tea ritual and put the money instead into a fund to support patients who were terminally ill. Then, following patient deaths, they helped to fund funeral expenses. Other friends and acquaintances became interested and in the space of a year *Shwe Na Lone Thar* had established a small office and consisted of a staff of over 20 volunteers. They had learned, too, that many people entering the hospital were dying from HIV related illnesses. Wishing to prevent further suffering, they began investing time in HIV prevention activities, at bus stops and amongst migrant workers and taxi drivers. The group began to gain a reputation in the town and soon came to the attention of the local authorities and then of the local area commander. By October 2005 it had been closed down. The official reason given was that it was not registered to provide support to the sick, and that hospitals should play this role. What is more likely, according to local NGO workers, is that the regime, fearful of any group that displays initiative which might lead to a destabilisation of the state, closed it down.

Another reason for the demise of groups such as *Shwe Na Lone Tha* is the desire of the regime to promote its own 'civil society' organisations, or GONGOs. These consist of a number of national associations, such as the Maternal and Child Welfare Association, which is headed by the wife of Secretary One<sup>13</sup> of the military regime. This association is tasked with the welfare of women and children and has

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<sup>12</sup> This was related to me in the course of work I was doing with UNDP and is based on conversations with members of *Shwe Na Lone Thar* itself.

<sup>13</sup> One of the senior leaders of the regime.

branches in all townships, under the chair of the local area commander's wife. The links with the regime are obvious but, despite this, there have been instances of positive outcomes from their work – encouraging mothers to bring their children for vaccination programs, for example. More ominous is The Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), the political youth wing of the regime, led by Senior General Than Shwe (head of the SPDC) himself. Recent government policies have seen the USDA asserting its desire to accompany ICRC officials on prison visits, and to take over the implementation of International NGO programs. Even internationally affiliated organisations, such as the Myanmar Red Cross, are also widely considered to be a quasi-governmental structure and through these organisations, the regime seeks to build its own form of civil society and social capital.

Progressively, international NGOs are being forced to implement their programs through the GONGOs, and local civil society groups are being forced to officially register (a process that can take years). New guidelines for international and local organisations were released during 2006 (Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development) and, if properly imposed, could see far greater restrictions on implementation and an increasing push for GONGO / INGO partnerships. This will reinforce the control of the state and test the resolve and ingenuity of the international community, as well as the nascent civil society movement.

### *The impact of the Burmese state on children*

The overriding climate of fear and oppression and the overt and subtle ways through which the regime exerts influence has had a substantial impact on the lives of children. Basic indicators of childhood wellbeing reflect a grossly inadequate

situation, in which the rights of children to survival, protection and development are consistently challenged (Hável and Tutu, 2005, UNDP, 2004).

*Basic indicators of child wellbeing: health, education and gender*

There are an estimated 21 million children and adolescents in Burma amongst a population of approximately 47 million<sup>14</sup>. Basic indicators for children's health are amongst the lowest in the world. Out of the 1.3 million children born each year, over 92,000 die in their first year and a further 138,000 before the age of five. Tens of thousands more suffer from diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, diarrhoeal diseases and acute respiratory tract infections. UNICEF (2004) reports that Myanmar continues to have unusually high rates of infant mortality, estimating that 50% of child deaths are attributable to preventable causes and that one in three children suffer from malnourishment.

Public spending on education is very low; 6.98% of the state budget went to education in 1998-99, compared to 49.93% for defence (Grumiau, 2003). Only three quarters of eligible children start primary school, and one quarter of those will drop out over the first or second year. Less than half of those remaining will complete primary school (fifth standard), and less still (one in four), will continue to high school (UNICEF Myanmar, 2001). UNESCO reports that there are 39,000 primary schools in the country but many of these are situated far from villages and have extremely limited facilities (Grumiau, 2003). Often this means that schools do not even have teachers, let alone books and tables<sup>15</sup>. The situation regarding high schools is far worse with less than 3,000 in the country, meaning that many

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<sup>14</sup> Though there has been no census in Burma for over a decade.

<sup>15</sup> In 8 years living in Myanmar, I have visited many areas in which communities have had to find their own teachers. This is particularly the case in ethnic areas where government teachers that have been sent to rural areas (if they have been sent at all) have no understanding of the local language or customs and often do not attend the school at all.

children, if they are fortunate enough to complete primary education, have no prospect at all of attending high school at all.

In many societies education is seen as one of the most important aspect of a child's socialisation and as a preparation for the adult world. However, the limited attendance at school, indicated by the figures above, are indicative of both a lack of trust in the education system, as well as limited access to schools. The curriculum committee responsible for the development of the school curriculum was previously headed by the then Prime Minister and the head of the Military Intelligence, General Khin Nyunt. Under his leadership, some authors claim that the curriculum was purposely written to encourage children to see and accept the role of the military in the government of the country (Fink, 2001). Competitions are held each year to find the best students in the country. This depends on exam results which, as the discussion in the following chapter will show, depends more on the ability of children to regurgitate government propaganda or even on bribes to examiners than actual intellectual ability.

As well as the propaganda included in the school curriculum, high school students are encouraged to join the USDA which, according to a number of sources, was responsible for the recent attack on Aung Sang Suu Kyi and her party at De Pa Yin (NCGUB, 2004). Joining the USDA brings with it the benefits of reduced fees and better grades (Fink, 2001). For young people without national identity cards, membership with the USDA can quickly alter that situation (KMA, 2003).

Teaching, once a highly revered profession, has now become corrupt. Teachers' wages are so low (around \$US 8.00 per month) that teachers are forced to ask their students for gifts, or even bribes, and to require them to attend private tuition classes for which they must pay. As one teacher noted:

*'In my primary school, which achieves quite good results, the pupils need between 15,000 and 30,000 kyats (between 15 and 30 dollars) a month on average in order to attend classes, including their schoolbooks and private lessons. I know that is too much for most parents, particularly if they have a lot of children, and I do not like to force the pupils to attend my private lessons, but I have no choice: after a 10-year career I only earn 5,000 kyats per month (it was 3,000 at the start of my career, but at the time the kyat was worth more). When I retire my monthly pension will only be 1,500 kyats. My rent is 28,000 kyats per month; I have to pay 52 kyats a day for the bus to and from school, plus food, clothes. So to survive I have to encourage my pupils to attend my private lessons. School starts at 9am and goes on till 3.30pm, from Monday to Friday. From 3.30 to 4.30pm I hold a first series of private lessons at the school, which cost 1,000 kyats per month. About 20 of the 30 pupils come to them. Then, from 5 to 6.30pm I hold more advanced private lessons in my own home and about 12 pupils attend them, each paying 4,000 kyats per month for 3 days per week. I have to run that kind of system in order to survive myself, but it makes me sad to know that not all my pupils have the same opportunities since they cannot all afford to attend the private lessons' (A teacher quoted anonymously in (Grumiau, 2003).*

The impaired state of the education system is due partly to lack of resources and is partly intentional. The regime has an underlying mistrust of students, as they have long played an activist role in society. The historical roots of the present military regime itself lie within a student activist past. The founder of independent Burma and the Tatmadaw, Aung San, as a young student, spoke out vigorously against the oppression of the British colonisers. Students played a major role in the democracy

uprising in 1988. Many students as young as 11 and 12 took to the streets to protest for a new government and an end to military rule, and many were killed as a result of their passion and commitment to see change (Fink, 2001).

As a result of further student unrest in 1996, all schools were closed for a year and new university campuses were built across the rivers from Rangoon. This was done primarily to get the students away from the then capital and the seat of power. Any student unrest in the satellite campuses could be easily controlled by closing the bridges, thereby making any advance on the city impossible. It was also a tactic to either encourage students to live away from home or spend the day travelling long distances, making them too tired to even think about protesting. The impact of interrupted schooling and, for many, lack of any access to education what so ever, has not been systematically documented, nor is this likely under the present regime. Empirical data collection in the following chapters, however, will suggest that the social and psychological ramifications of these policies are already taking their toll on Burma's youth.

It is not unusual for access to health and education to be affected by gender roles within society. In Burma's case, while gender discrepancies exist, they are perhaps not as significant as in some other countries. In general, the Myanmar government considers that laws and policies relating to gender are compatible with the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2000). UNDP's Human Development Report (UNDP, 2004) shows equity with men, in terms of life expectancy, adult literacy rates, combined (primary, secondary and tertiary) school enrolment ratio, and income. UNICEF

(2001) estimates that 46% of women in Myanmar are economically active, including those in unpaid domestic work. Reproductive work (childbearing, care and household work) is generally the responsibility of women, as is much of the unpaid work in any community (van Zuijlen, 2005). There are strong societal expectations defining appropriate feminine and masculine behaviour, with girls expected to be shy and modest and boys to be active and more outspoken. Decision-making in the household is generally seen as the male's domain (van Zuijlen, 2005), although in reality this is not always the case.

### Child work

For most families in Burma life is a constant struggle. Daily wages, even for most professionals, are nowhere near sufficient to feed, clothe and provide the educational and health costs for the average family (Grumiau, 2003). The economic situation, combined with the limitations of the education system, begs the question of what happens to those children who are not in school. Despite a lack of recent clear empirical data, NGOs that focus on children (such as Save the Children and World Vision Myanmar), along with simple observation, suggest that many end up working. In fact children can be observed in a wide variety of work environments throughout the country. This is not to imply that all work is bad for children. Indeed the author's own research would suggest that many working children are able to balance school, work and social activities and to feel quite proud to be able to work to help support the family. However, the extent to which children have to work appears indicative of economic hardship and necessity, more so than children taking part in a family activity. According to the ILO in 1995, there were 1,236,000 economically active children between the ages of 10-14, representing 24.51% of this age group. Of these, 538,000 were girls and 698,000

were boys. For the year 2000, the ILO projected that there would be 1,228,000 economically active children, 534,000 girls and 694,000 boys between the ages of 10-14, representing 22.94% of this age group (ILO, 1997). While these statistics are difficult to confirm conclusively, given the school attendance figures quoted by UNICEF they are, if anything, likely to be an underestimate. More concerning, however, is the type of work in which children become involved.

A Human Rights Watch Report released in 2002 claims that Burma is the largest 'employer' of child soldiers in the world, with over 80,000 young boys engaged in the government military or anti-government militias (Heppner, 2002). A subsequent report (Heppner, 2007) observes that, although precise numbers are difficult to estimate that the current situation of forced recruitment does not appear to have significantly changed. Trafficking of young people, particularly girls, in the sex industry and in other exploitative labour situations in Thailand and further afield, is also of grave and growing concern (Wille, 2001). Research conducted in Rangoon in May 2002 into the situation of boys working in tea shops and girls in domestic service (Ar Thit Consultancy Group, 2002) found that many children, both boys and girls, have been brought systematically from rural areas to Rangoon to work. Children interviewed in this study reported very long hours of work, with little pay and, usually, limited opportunity for recreation, let alone educational opportunity. However, by comparison, many of these children can be considered the lucky ones, having at least food and a roof over their heads. Many children face far worse situations, surviving on and around the streets and living from hand to mouth each day. While again there is no accurate estimate of the number of children living and

working on the streets, numbers of up to 7,000 children in Rangoon have been estimated and similar numbers in Mandalay<sup>16</sup>.

### Children and the law

Legal systems have also suffered as a result of military control and the lack of an independent judiciary. Laws that might assist in the fulfilment of children's rights are either inadequate or inadequately enforced (Falco, 2003, Hável and Tutu, 2005). The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)<sup>17</sup> enacted the Child Law (Law No. 9/93) on the 11<sup>th</sup> Waning Day of 1<sup>st</sup> Waso, 1355 ME or the 14<sup>th</sup> July 1993 (State Law and Order Restoration Council). While the Myanmar government signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, accepting the definition of child as anyone under the age of 18, the Myanmar Child Law contradicts this:

*The following expressions contained in this Law shall have the meanings given hereunder:*

- (a) *Child means a person who has not attained the age of 16 years;*
- (b) *Youth means a person who has attained the age of 16 years but has not attained the age of 18 years (State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1993)*

The Child Law explicitly states its support for the Convention on the Rights of the Child as one of its aims (State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1993 p4), and refers directly to the law being a tool to achieve the best interests of the child in Burmese society. It does not, however, elaborate on what that might mean.

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<sup>16</sup> According to World Vision Myanmar reports.

<sup>17</sup> The SLORC was the name of the military regime that took power following the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings. It later changes its name to the SPDC.

The committee charged for overseeing the Law (headed by the Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement) has the duty of 'protecting and safeguarding the rights of the child' (State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1993 p6). Chapter Five of the Law affirms the right of children to survival, development, protection and care, as well as to 'achieve active participation within the community' (State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1993 p8). This includes the child's right to citizenship, echoing the CRC by stating that,

*Every child who is capable of expressing his or her own views in accordance with his age and maturity has the right to express his own views in matters concerning children...the views of the child shall be given due weight in accordance with his age and maturity, by those concerned (State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1993 p10).*

The Child Law affords every child the right to freedom of speech and expression in accordance with the law and affirms the need for children to be able to play, to engage in leisure and to participate in age appropriate sporting and cultural activities. It acknowledges the right of children to engage in work 'in accordance with law and of his own volition', and designates the Ministry of Labour as the responsible ministry for monitoring this.

The age of criminal responsibility for a child is 7 years, although this is further qualified by maturity:

*Nothing is an offence which is done by a child above 7 years of age and under 12, who has not attained sufficient maturity of understanding to judge of the nature and consequences of his conduct on that occasion. (p 15, Chapter VI 28 b).*

The Child Law describes a code of conduct for children under the heading, Ethics and Discipline of a Child (See Child Law, Annex 4, Chapter VII, p8). Children are tasked with upholding the law and abiding not only by parental discipline but also by the discipline of teachers and the community as well. Parents, teachers and guardians, on their part, are tasked with ensuring that ethics and discipline are 'infused' into children. The idea that responsibility for childhood discipline is a community one reinforces the notion that children's worlds exist beyond their families and, in terms of allowing for children to develop their own social networks, could be considered quite positive.

While the Child Law leaves much to be desired in some respects, the reference made to the Convention on the Rights of the Child indicates at least tacit acceptance by the regime of elements of the convention. Indeed, the government has put in place (at least in name) Committees on the Rights of the Child in every township, State and Divisional level. The role of these committees is to ensure adherence both to the child law and to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since the early 1990s UNICEF has worked with the government to train members of the CRC committees, as well as officers of the law and the Department of Social Welfare officers with responsibility for children. Particular effort has been put into combating child trafficking, a topical child protection issue.

As a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Burma is obligated to provide periodic reports to the Committee on the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The last report, submitted in November 2003, articulates a reasonably

comprehensive description of the way in which the regime conceptualises childhood. It speaks of children as 'precious gems', names of gems being commonly used for many things in Burma. Skidmore (2005) calls this a metaphorical alchemy, noting that many names of businesses, journals, people, and indeed just about everything, commonly include names of precious stones or gold and silver. The 2003 report emphasises the importance of Myanmar tradition in relation to childhood and it identified Buddhist teaching as playing a key role as the nurturer of social cohesion; *'The parents are the first mentors of a child'*, thus, parents call their children 'precious gems' (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2003 p8).

The parental role, according to the report, is to discourage their children from misbehaving and to assist them in learning. Children are to attend to their parents in both social and business affairs and to do 'good deeds' for them both during their life and after their death. Teachers are to impart both knowledge and to model good behaviour. They are to protect children; *'to speak well of their virtues and attainments and to keep them from danger'*, and pupils to be obedient towards teachers, to serve them and supply their needs and to learn *'carefully and respectfully'* (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2003 p8).

Apart from those in immediate contact with children, the report also calls on the community and the extended family to engage with children, stating that this is *'an inborn social task'* (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2003 p8). Given the observations made by Thomas and Hocking (2003) in the previous chapter this attitude also has some positive connotations for children. The report suggests that

children's rights have been fully realised in this way, through: culture and tradition that presupposes parent's responsibility for their children (paragraph 45); the 'best' services afforded by the state in education, social and health (paragraph 48); and the services afforded by the state to orphans and disabled children (paragraph 49). Particularly relevant for the topic of this thesis, the report goes on to claim that children's views are taken into account according to the child law section 13 a, b & c which state (the first two points quoted directly from the Convention on the Rights of the Child):

*13. (a) Every child who is capable of expressing his or her own views in accordance with his age and maturity has the right to express his own views in matters concerning children;*

*(b) The views of the child shall be given due weight in accordance with his age and maturity, by those concerned;*

*(c) The child shall be given the opportunity of making a complaint, being heard and defended in the relevant Government department, organization or court either personally or through a representative in accordance with law, in respect of his rights.*

This has been achieved, so the report claims, by virtue of the fact that children are able to express their inner feelings through such means as paintings, colouring and wall journals, on which there is no prohibition (paragraph 60), and through their artistic abilities aired through radio and television (paragraph 61).

There is much in the report on the positive interaction that exists between parents and children in the Myanmar family (paragraph 97 for example). To a large extent

this is claimed to be a result of Buddhist teaching and obedience to the duties and responsibilities towards each other.

The report acknowledges the need and right of all children to work in support of their families, in accordance with The Child Law (Section 24 (a) (ii)). It claims that not many children are in fact working and those that do are not exploited nor exposed to hazardous jobs (paragraph 233). Only children 13 years and older are permitted to work under law and a child between the ages of 13 and 15 may only work for a maximum of four hours a day and not between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.. A young person between 15 to 18 years old may be allowed to work as an adult, as long as he/she has a medical certificate stating fitness for work.

The report concludes with a statement more reflective of the ideal Myanmar childhood than of the reality faced by the majority of children:

*Myanmar society is founded upon gentleness and kindness and there is no discrimination based on sex, culture, class or colour. Children in Myanmar are regarded as jewels by Myanmar society and systematic child-rearing is practised, and thus it is one of the most child-caring countries among the developing countries. The upbringing of a Myanmar child is also influenced by his or her own religious teachings and guidance aimed at becoming a noble and worthy person of the society. Theravada Buddhism, the predominant religion in the country, naturally plays a vital role in this respect (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2003 paragraph 247).*

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2004), responding to Myanmar's report, raised some obvious concerns. In general they noted that traditional attitudes ensured that respect for the views of the child was limited and that society at large

tended to favour a paternalistic and authoritarian approach to children (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2004 paragraph 32). They refuted the claim of universal birth registration (paragraph 34) and expressed deep concern over the widespread economic exploitation of children and particularly of practices of forced labour and recruitment of children into the armed forces (paragraph 68).

There are other obvious contradictions between the government report and the reality of life for many children in Burma as observed in other sections of this chapter. However, it does provide an insight into the way in which Burmese society (at least from the regime's perspective) think (or like to think that they think) about children, childhood and the way in which children should be raised. The fact that childhood comes to an end at the age of 16 is perhaps a reflection of the reality of life in a country where children are expected to work from an early age. This may be a result of the predominantly agrarian nature of a society where children often have responsibilities, working on the farm or caring for younger siblings. However, as will be shown, the increase in urbanisation and the severe economic decline of the country over the past ten years has brought about conditions in which children have not only been forced to work but have become vulnerable to many of the worst forms of child labour<sup>18</sup>.

What is apparent in the analysis of the child law and statements and reports on the Convention on the Rights of the Child is that there is a very clearly articulated concept of childhood in Burma. It is one in which children are respectful to their

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<sup>18</sup> The International Labour Office (ILO) convention number 182 recognises that the total abolition of child labour will be an incremental process but that certain forms of child labour are intolerable. It seeks to suppress extreme forms of child labour including slavery and forced labour, trafficking, prostitution, pornography and illegal activities and hazardous work such as mining.

elders, are brought up with deep religious (Buddhist) beliefs, are supported by a nurturing and supportive extended family environment and are both expected to study and work hard and to bear responsibility for the care of their parents. That childhood ends at the age of sixteen would suggest that such responsibility is placed on children from a relatively young age. As Skidmore suggests, the family is perhaps the least invaded space of the junta (Skidmore, 2005) and while that may be true in an overt sense, it has been shown that the policies and practices of the Burmese regime do indeed have a visible and debilitating effect on the lives of children and their parents. This has been especially evident in the increasing demand for children to become economically active from a very early age, as a result of poverty. This leads often to children dropping out from school and taking on responsibility, not only for younger siblings and elderly family members, but in many cases becoming the main bread winners for their entire families. At the same time, the junta maintains an illusion that childhood is sacred and that all children benefit from a well rounded education and have prospects for a bright future.

#### Buddhism and childhood in Burma

*'Answering the question 'What is mankind's treasure?' Lord Buddha said, 'Children are mankind's treasure.' They are not the parent's treasure alone, but of mankind; as such they should receive the tender care and affection of the entire human society'. (Thero, 1993)*

The military regime grounds much of its policy and law relating to children in Buddhist teaching and philosophy. Thus, a more detailed understanding of Buddhism, as it relates to children, helps to further illuminate the way in which childhood is embodied in Burma. There is much in Buddhism about the nature of

children and their rights and responsibilities. Buddhist teaching outlines five responsibilities of children to their parents.

*i) As the parents have supported the child, so should the child support the parents. Sons and daughters should support their parents. They should wait upon them when they are sick or old. In fact they should deem it a great blessing and privilege to minister to, wait upon and look after their parents when they become helpless, old or destitute.*

*ii) The child should do the parents' duties. Children should always try to understand what are the requirements and necessities of their parents, and they must try to provide them to the best of their abilities. Children should not hesitate to provide anything that their parents need for their satisfaction. They should see to the comfort and happiness of their parents.*

*iii) Children should uphold the family tradition and lineage. It is an important duty of children to continue the good works started by their parents. They should preserve the family tradition. They should carry on any philanthropic or social work started by their parents, especially after their death. The good name of the parents should be preserved by their worthy children. Good, cultured children do nothing to bring discredit to the good name of their parents.*

*iv) Children should act in such a way as to be worthy of their inheritance. Whatever legacy or property they receive from their parents should be protected and, if possible, increased. Children may earn a lot in later life, but they should always preserve the ancestral property with due honour and care.*

*v) Furthermore, children should offer alms in honour of their departed relatives. It is one of the noble duties and customs to remember and revere parents after their death. Children offer alms to monks and the needy, and then transfer the merits acquired thereby to the departed ones. (Thera, 2002)*

In the Buddhist consciousness then, children bear a great deal of responsibility for their parents, in particular. Buddhist teaching dictates that the fulfilment of children's responsibilities should be based on their abilities; no reference is made to their age. It encourages children to take responsibility for their parents, in gratitude for the sacrifices that they have made for them. Buddhism in Burma, as in other predominantly Buddhist cultures, has its own idiosyncrasies and a basic understanding of these sheds light on the way in which Burmese today view their children and childhood. There is no complete agreement as to when and how Buddhism was first brought to Burma, although it is clear that the two major strands of Buddhism, Mahayana and Theravada, have both influenced Buddhist practice and belief. This has been influenced by spirit worship, magic and the Tantric system (a mixture of magic, witchcraft and Siva-worship) which is still reflected today in the worship of Nats (spirits) (Ko, 1913). It is a regular occurrence for parents to seek the advice of fortune-tellers or astrologers to assist in the naming of the child. Planets are believed to be the abodes of the nats and the planet that presides over a person on the day of their birth is believed to have an influence over them for the rest of their life (Tun T, 2000). The planet under which one is born helps to shape the person's character and fortune in life and determines one's name. The Burmese alphabet (of 33 letters) is divided amongst the 7 days and a person's name will then contain the associated character. In addition, each day also has an animal or creature associated with it, that again helps to shape a person's life (Han, 1963).

One of the most important scholarly philosophical works in the history of Burma is the Lokaniti produced by the famous Myanmar philosopher, Caturangabala, who lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century in the ancient city of Pyay. The Lokaniti or 'guide to life' draws on both Buddhist and Hindu sacred writings and is still used throughout the country as a handbook for parents, teachers and elders when instructing youth (Tu, 2000). The Lokaniti stresses the importance of education for the young:

*If during the first period of life one acquires not learning.....how then will one acquire these during the fourth period of like? (16)*

*Beloved son apply thyself to learning...the untrained have to labour for others (17)*

*The mother is deemed the enemy of her son, the father is deemed the enemy of his son who does not make him study in his youth. (18)*

*Study increases learning, learning increases knowledge, knowledge brings understanding and understanding brings peace<sup>19</sup>. (21)*

*In life there is no friend like learning; no enemy like illness; no person worthy of affection as oneself; and no strength like the merit of one's deeds. (23)*

*Eating, copulating and sleeping are common to men and cattle, it is learning which distinguishes man. Take away learning and men are as cattle. (22)*

Learning is a tradition of which the Burmese have long been proud. Teaching is one of the Buddhist 'charities' (an act by which one can gain merit) and monasteries have been the centre of learning for centuries.

The tradition of sending young boys to the monastery for education is a well established part of Burmese Buddhist culture. In the past, the monastery was the

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<sup>19</sup> Peace of mind according to the Burmese

only place of learning. Although the state now provides as education it is still customary for Buddhist boys to complete at least a week in a monastery as a novice. This is a vital time for boys and it signifies their coming of age (Han, 1963). While in the monastery, boys are expected to follow the routine of the monks, which includes begging for alms in the early morning, learning prayers and



Picture 2- Three young boys prepare for their novitiation ceremony

receiving religious instruction. Girls do not generally enter the nunnery but they undergo an 'ear-boring' ceremony to signify their coming of age. These ceremonies are important landmarks for children and are the beginning of their acceptance into the adult community.

The *Lokaniti* contains a number of other references to children, such as the following, which implies that children have potential to change their circumstances:

*The son of low-born parents may become a king's minister; the son of fools may become a sage; the son of poor parents may acquire great riches. Do not, therefore, despise any man. (37)*

Discipline for children is also addressed:

*The potter does not strike his pots to break them but to bring out their excellence; the teacher does not strike his pupils to cause them suffering but to increase their learning and opportunities in life. (39)*

Responsibility of the parents to children is also mentioned:

*If a son does evil the mother is to blame; if a pupil does evil the teacher is to blame; if the subject does evil the king is to blame; if the king does evil his counsellors are to blame. (128)*

That children can and should take some control over their own destiny is emphasised in Buddhist teaching. Teachings based on the Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Lokaniti*, speak of the importance of education and the reciprocity of care between parent and child. The centrality of Buddhist teaching, although in many families influenced by belief in astrology and the ever present Nats, lends itself to openness and indeed to an expectation that children take responsibility for themselves and for their moral and spiritual education, from an early age.

#### Civil society and children

The embryonic civil society discussed previously has had a marked impact on children. A World Vision Myanmar report (Gyaw, 1999) uncovered an extensive network of different institutions, organisations and individuals providing support for children who, for one reason or another were no longer receiving care and support from their biological families. Reasons included: poverty, education and displacement due to armed conflict. The report estimated over 300 groups or individuals providing long term care to well over 30,000 children between and including the cities of Rangoon and Mandalay. These were often small groups belonging to religious bodies (churches or mosques), comprised of individuals who had an interest in the welfare of children or who were receiving some kind of remuneration for their services. They are indicative of a fledgling civil society and of one that has the best interests of children at its core. There are also formal and well established mechanisms of civil society, such as the monastic system, caring from children. It has long been a means through which poor children (both boys and girls), in particular, can receive a basic education. In many communities the

only schools are monastic schools. They teach the government curriculum, usually relying on volunteer teachers and they operate up until the end of primary school (standard 5). At the end of the last century, there were approximately 1,600 monastic primary schools around the country (Union of Myanmar, 1998). There are also just fewer than 50 middle schools and a handful of monastic education high schools that will take children up to the end of high school and enable them to qualify for university entrance.

Most children attending monastic education schools do not become novices, apart from their traditional noviciation period of a week or so. However, monasteries all around the country allow for children to become novices for as long as they or their parents wish. Estimates of the total number of novices around the country are likely to be around 350,000<sup>20</sup>. Novice nuns are less common and number under 100,000 by similar estimates. Increasingly, monasteries have become homes for children whose parents are unable to care for them. In this way they form a welfare safety net for the disadvantaged. For some children, becoming a novice is the only way in which parents can afford to send their children to school. Some monastic high schools, like the Phaung Daw Oo Monastic Education School in Mandalay, have thousands of students from many different parts of the country.

Since 1992 there has been a steady, although modest, increase in the presence of international aid and development agencies. UNICEF supports programs in the areas of health, education and child protection. International child focussed NGOs, including World Vision and Save the Children Fund, now have a well established

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<sup>20</sup> This figure was arrived at by asking a number of monks and teachers in monastic schools. Given the isolation of some parts of the country and the communication difficulties it is really impossible to get an accurate count however.

presence in the country. These international agencies engage the regime in different ways, with the aim of increasing the health and development outcomes for disadvantaged children in the country. They join with government social welfare services and the expanding number of local organisations<sup>21</sup>; schools, orphanages, and welfare groups, in providing a mechanism through which the needs of the country's children are, to some degree, being met. However, the structure of this nascent but growing 'civil society' is vague and insecure, ultimately controlled by the vicissitudes of military leadership that seldom seems to put children as their first priority.

## *Conclusions*

There are many complexities associated with understanding children and childhood in Burma in the present time. Literature reviewed to date indicates that the political environment is an especially important factor influencing the way in which children are brought up. Strongly embedded cultural values and laws are being eroded through lack of resources, poor policies and a climate of fear and mistrust. Many children are unable to attend even basic schooling, the long term impact of which is yet to be fully understood. Families that can afford to, create an alternative world for their own children, enrolling them in schools for the elite or sending them out of the country to study. For the majority of children, however, work, responsibility and an 'adult' life begins from an early age. A large and apparently increasing number of children are being forced into exploitative working situations, including the

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<sup>21</sup> 'Unknown' as many of these groups choose to keep a low profile for fear of government closure. Officially such groups must register with the Department of Social Welfare, however, based on my experience in the country, this is an extremely time consuming and usually ill-fated endeavour. I base the claim that the number of such groups is growing based on the course of my eight years working with World Vision Myanmar, during which time we had requests from an increasing number of local groups as the economic situation declined, often one or two a week.

military and the sex industry, despite protestations from the authorities that this is not the case.

The Myanmar Child Law articulates what could be seen as a 'diluted' version of the CRC, insofar as it stops short and compromises on some of the basic principles of the convention, particularly the age of childhood. The participation of children is an integral component of the Child Law but it is reflected in a naive and simplistic manner; consisting of art and dramatic expression. This is a far cry from the intention of the CRC that gives credibility and authority to children's voices. Notwithstanding its inherent flaws, if the Child Law were to be put into practice it is possible that the situation for children might improve. However, the present legal, health, welfare and education systems are poorly resourced, often corrupt and are ultimately unable to provide the support to children and families that is needed so urgently. As a result, the growing civil society movement is playing an increasing role in the nurture and care for children and youth. However, increasing government scrutiny on such groups raises questions about their long term ability to operate.

Other factors, particularly religion and culture, have in the past been crucial in the way in which children are nurtured. They have traditionally mapped out the socialisation of children and their path into adulthood. Increasingly, however, traditional ways and religious associations, such as the Buddhist sangha, responsible for leadership within the Buddhist community, are being influenced by military rule, raising valid concerns for the well-being of children and resulting in the deterioration of behavioural norms and values that have in the past been so

important to Burmese society (Schober, 2005). However the Burmese consistently articulate a sense of love and respect for their children, no matter what their political affiliations, social class or religious heritage. What is not evident in the literature to date and the reporting of commentators on the situation of children in Burma, is the voice of children themselves. The following chapter will, therefore, explore contemporary experiences of children and their communities, in an attempt to further understand the impact of the present situation and the way in which children themselves are responding.

# Childhood and Childhood Experiences in Burma: Narrative, Socio-Economic and Political Perspectives

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## Chapter 4

*What is Buddhism? Buddhism is free thought....I will tell you one thing [about] one Myanmar Buddhist monk; he was a very famous monk during the colonial times and maybe 60 or 70 years old. One day he paid his respects to a young novice only 7 years old, and some people asked him, 'Why do you pay your respects to a young boy?' And he answered, 'he is wise and intelligent so I show my respect to him (From interview with The Venerable U Nayaka).*

### *Introduction*

Chapter Four has two objectives. Firstly it will add to the existing limited knowledge of childhood and children in Burma through an analysis of the different social, economic and political influences that affect their quality of life. Different themes identified in Chapter Three will be elaborated upon, particularly the role of religion, education and, as is the case for many children, their role in the (mostly informal) economy. The second aim of this chapter is to understand how children's potential for participation is affected by the environment in which they live. This has resulted in the chapter being divided into three distinct sections: one that looks at the way the 'narrative' of Burmese childhood is constructed through culture and history (the 'Narrative Realm'); one that identifies specific social, political and economic influences on childhood and the influence of contemporary events (the 'Socio-Political Realm'); and finally one that looks at the role that the child plays in

determining his or her own childhood, in other words, the personal agency of the child (the 'Personal Realm').

To this point in the thesis it has been shown that participation is not simply the act of taking part. Understandings of participation have been influenced by many factors, including history and politics, and more recently through the growth of participative community development methodologies and tools. People participate for many reasons and in many forms. Western democracies are founded on certain principles of participation but these are not necessarily embraced across the globe. Participation has been interpreted by some as a fundamental human right (for example Arnstein, 1969, Boyden et al., 1998, Hart, 1997, Theis, 2004, Verhellen, 2000, Ahmad, 2005, Lansdown, 2004), and by others such as Gujit and Shah (1998) as a disguise for other agendas. More recently, participation has been identified as the 'new tyranny' of the development industry (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Notwithstanding these diverse opinions, most authors agree that the fundamental idea of inclusion within a participatory process remains a positive development strategy. Furthermore, it is accepted wisdom that people's ability to participate is dependent upon a multitude of factors, including their social and political environment, gender, education and motivation. The complexities of participation relating to children are further compounded as age, psychological and social development demand consideration. The question of children's citizenship and the conflict around protection issues adds further depth and nuance to understanding participation (for example Jans, 2004).

Callincos (2000) talks of postmodernism being the absence of a meta-narrative and in the previous chapters it has been argued that participation within the development discourse is fundamentally postmodern in nature: that is, there is a rich diversity of interpretation. Although it can be argued that there is no single grand narrative of participation, all perspectives assume elements of decision-making, collective action, inclusion, human rights and, vitally, encompass commonly accepted democratic principles and practices that are articulated in numerous human rights treaties.

If this is the case then Burma, governed by a military regime, must, by definition, be counted as one of the least 'participative' countries in the world. However, the situation of children in Burma that is outlined in Chapter Three suggests that such analysis is overly simplistic. It has been shown through the review of relevant literature that children play a vital role within Burmese society, both in a practical sense, through their labour (paid and unpaid) and in a representational sense, through what they embody for their parents and the community more widely. While this is not necessarily indicative of 'participation', if defined in terms of human rights discourse, the varying roles children play in Burmese society demand greater scrutiny.

#### *The nature of data in Burma*

Empirical data was collected from a range of key informants: adults who are either parents or cultural guardians of knowledge about children (including teachers, parents, grandparents and religious leaders); and children who represent different socio-economic strata of contemporary Burmese society. In addition to focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews, data gathered also included

observations and personal reflections about children within different social and community contexts. Fink (2001) refers to a 'collective amnesia' within Burmese society; a strategy employed by many Burmese (usually subconsciously) to maintain a sense of dignity and to put up with the contradictions and the fear of living under a military dictatorship. Data collected for this thesis supports such a hypothesis insofar as it made clear that nothing in Burma is ever really as it seems. Rather than a collective amnesia, however, I prefer to see the life experience of many Burmese more in terms of a collective illusion. There appear to be two distinct elements to this. Firstly, the regime creates an illusion; through the media, the education system and other communication channels, that the country is developing and prospering despite, as Chapter Three indicated, that this is very clearly not the case. Secondly, people accept the illusion, even though they might not believe it to be true, in order to maintain a semblance of normality and, more importantly, for self-preservation. These parallel realities colour the way in which people construct their day to day lives and, particularly important to this thesis, influence the way in which childhood is constructed and expressed. There is, of course, the actual reality which is, in most cases, a very different story. Uncovering that required a great deal of perseverance and the ability to look beyond the obvious. Empirical data collected revealed all realities and, in order to be as objective as possible, was supplemented by secondary sources, as well as personal observations made during the eight years that I spent in the country.

The following sections of Chapter Four focus on those factors that both directly and indirectly shape the way in which Burmese society constructs childhood. This construct is influenced by, among other things, history, religion, literature, politics

and the media. Often as members of a society we do not readily search behind why we believe certain things to be the way they are. We simply accept that they were always that way. This was integral to the argument used so forcefully by Ariès (1960), as described in Chapter Two. It is, therefore, important to understand the way in which the narrative or the 'story' of childhood has been constructed and the various factors, both historical and contemporary, that have created it. This, in turn, assists in understanding how, what could be considered new ideas (such as participation as described within the Convention on the Rights of the Child), might be perceived and accepted within the existing construct.

### *The narrative realm of Burmese childhood*

As Chapter Three identified, there are many apparent contradictions when looking at the situation of children in Burma. On the one hand, according to Skidmore (2005), they are much loved and referred to as jewels and the hope for the future, yet government policy and practice disadvantages and neglects children. Regarding education, for example, it has been shown (Chapter Three) that many children have limited and sometimes no access to school. Even children who do manage to complete school find little meaning in education, as it is corrupt, lacks challenging and stimulating curricula, and has little bearing on future employment opportunities (Lwin, 2000). Of greater concern, Burma is said to have the highest number of child soldiers in the world (Heppner, 2002). This does not suggest a great concern for its young. The common practice of working children is yet another example of the way in which children are potentially open to exploitation and abuse in unregulated workplaces (as argued by Ar Thit Consultancy Group, 2002). It appears that childhood and children in Burma are under assault from all

directions, and it is surprising that any child is able to develop, let alone survive, in the present circumstances of the country.

These conditions have led to the existence of many different 'childhoods'. In Burma today there are rural children, urban children, migrant children and refugee children, all with their own unique experience of growing up. There are children without families and those who live away from home. There are working children and children who have the opportunity to attend school in foreign countries. Similar statements could be made about many other countries in the region, or around the world, although the long-term presence of an authoritarian regime and the isolation of the country for a protracted period makes Burma idiosyncratic. Identifying commonalities amongst the multiple realities of childhood is a daunting task. However, in the course of data analysis certain broad, commonly accepted aspects of children and childhood emerged, and parents, opinion leaders and children alike spoke of a variety of experiences that informed the 'narrative' construction of Burmese childhood. Three (inter-related) dimensions in particular stood out:

1. The overwhelming influence of *religion* (particularly Buddhism)
2. Common understandings about different *stages of life* (childhood, youth, adulthood),
3. Certain facets of Burmese *culture* that influenced relationships between child and adult.

### *Buddhism*

U Nayaka, dressed in his crimson and earth brown robes, appears a wise and thoughtful man. He wears large dark rimmed glasses and changes them often to adjust for reading or distance. Good bifocals are not easy to find in Burma and they

are expensive. U Nayaka, his brother U Jotika, and another monk U Ponyananda, now all in their mid to late fifties, met in a monastery not far from Rangoon when they were only boys. They have lived together for around forty years. In Mandalay they have built a school, the Phaung Daw Oo Monastic Education High School. When I first visited the school in 1997, there were around 500 students. Perhaps a quarter of these were novices, who were children from the eastern states.



Picture 4 U Nayaka (left) & U Ponyananda, two of the founders of Phaung Daw Oo Monastic Education School

These boys had heard of the school and made the long journey to Mandalay in search of an education.

They wore the novice robes more from economic necessity than from any particular commitment to Buddhist philosophy. Novices can beg for alms and live in a monastery for next to nothing. Apart from the novices, the school was composed of poor children from the surrounding townships.

On the wall in the central school office building was a large wooden sign board that stated boldly in English, '*Free Education, Free Thought*'. U Nayaka informed me that it was initially the lack of fees that attracted parents to send their children to the school. In Burma, despite government policy that education is free, the reality is that many parents cannot afford to send their children to school. There are costs for uniforms and books, for computers (even when there is no electricity), for

buildings, for toilets, for tables and chairs and of course for teachers. In most schools, these costs do not amount to a great deal, perhaps \$30 or \$40 a year per child but for many parents this is simply too much.

Phaung Daw Oo is a very different school, when compared with others in Burma. Along with the large classes and chanting children so common to other schools, there is an unusual, palpable energy. Many of the teachers, paid substantially lower than their government counterparts, were school graduates themselves, and, enthused by their own education and the underlying philosophy of the school were happy to work for much less. As the school has grown over the years the free education has been helpful for impoverished families but it has been this philosophy of free thought that has appealed to parents and children alike and is the driving force behind the school's success. Of the 6,000 students at the school at the time of data collection, there were over 600 novices from eastern states and an increasing number of children, coming from other parts of Mandalay and the Dry Zone, who had heard of the school's reputation.



Picture 5 – Some of the novices at Thoun Htat Kyaung

Over the past four years, U Nayaka has sought to develop a presence in Rangoon, where he has bought a small monastery just near the foot of the Shwedagon Pagoda<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> The Shwedagon is the most famous pagoda in the country and is surrounded by many monasteries.

Thoun Htat Kyaung (literally, 'three storey school') is far more modest than its older brother in Mandalay. It houses a group of 20 novices and a handful of adults who teach and care for them. There are also classes in English and computer for the community that operate from the school and help to raise income to ensure the school's survival.

Sitting in the computer room of Thoun Htat Kyaung with me on the day of his interview, U Nayaka revealed a deep understanding and committed vision for monastic education. He talked of the growth of Buddhism and the monastic system in the Bagan era and how the philosophy of that time is reflected in what he is currently attempting to achieve. He feels that Buddhism has been a vital aspect in shaping the way in which people perceive children and childhood in contemporary Burma. Central to this is that the attainment of 'higher knowledge' or 'enlightenment' or 'free thought', as U Nayaka might now define it, is not dependent upon age. The short story told by U Nayaka, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, illustrates this point.

With responsibility for over 7,000 young lives who attend his school, U Nayaka has reflected deeply about what constitutes childhood in the Buddhist Burmese context.

He states:

*Buddhism does not close any people [sic], any children. So, Buddhist monks, they like all the children to be able to stay happily and also they like all the children to think happily but without bad deeds...Maybe some traditional Buddhist people, they think [that a] child is a child, adult man is a man but according to real Buddhism, [it is] not like that. That is not real Buddhism. Because I will tell you about Buddha's higher knowledge...at the age of Buddha, one novice, maybe 7 years old, he can attain higher*

*knowledge...The intelligence is not different. Not defined. And also according to Buddhism...I answer you with more information. Men and women [are] not different. Some pagoda trustees write, 'Women are not allowed to enter', that is not real Buddhism, because [both] men and women can attain the higher knowledge. That is real Buddhism. (U Nayaka)*

According to the abbot, children have played an important role in the promulgation of Buddhist teachings from early times, taking what they learned from the monasteries to teach their parents. The current practice of boys entering the monastery as novices for a short period of time maintains that tradition. The excerpt above suggests that enlightenment (higher knowledge), a central principle of Buddhism, is neither dependent on age nor gender. While U Nayaka is the first to acknowledge that his ideas about Buddhist teaching and theology may be different to some, the notions of childhood which he espouses remains a valid interpretation and one that does not seem uncommon. This perspective has a number of ramifications for the school and its students:

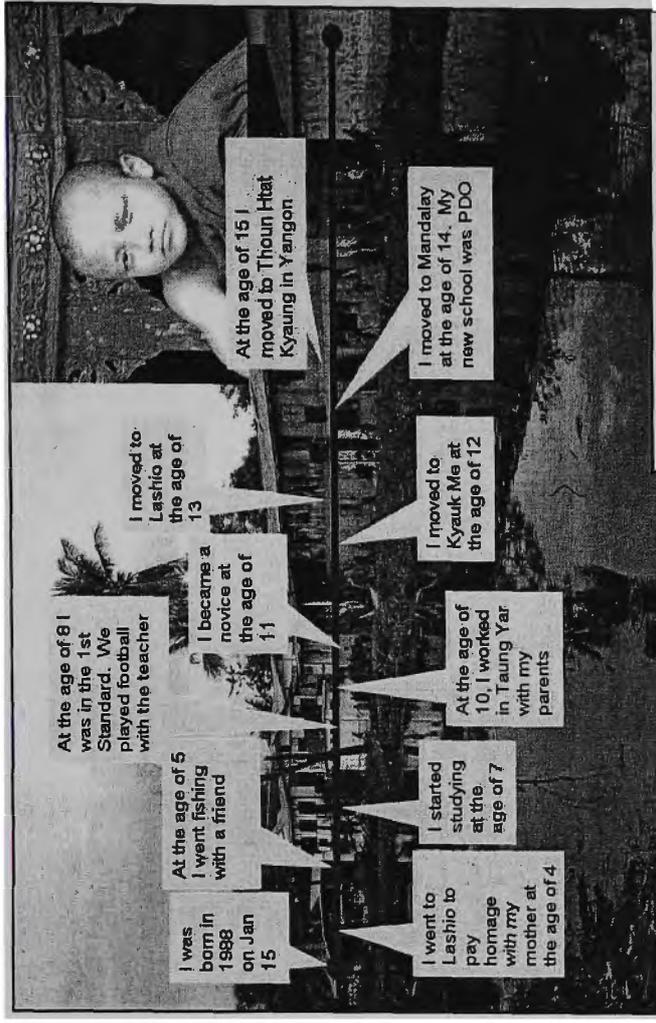
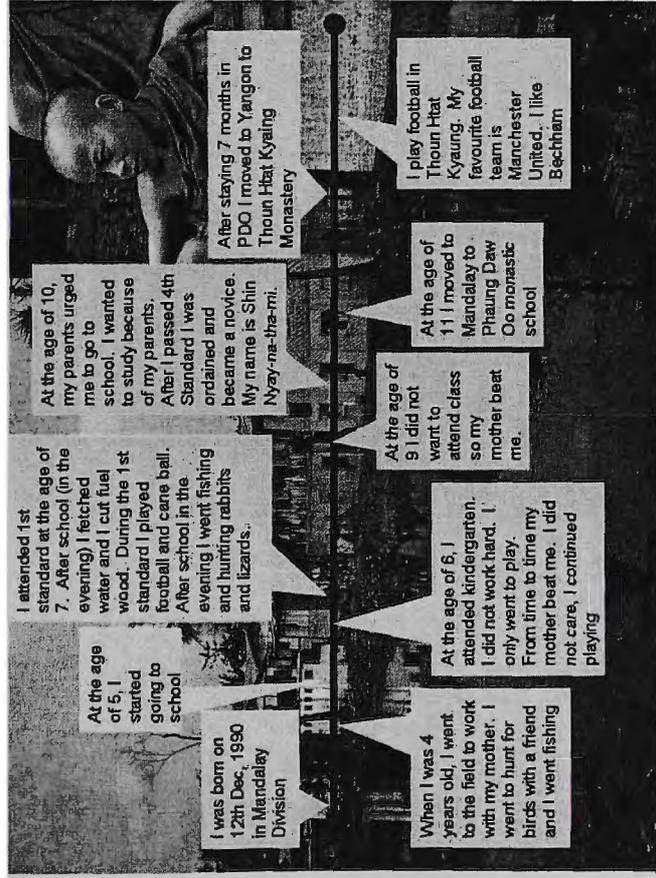
*....students, they can choose, it is their right...they have a chance. I think my school is very open-minded. I will tell them or the teacher or the pupil, you think freely, you have a free thought, don't close your mind and then you have a right, I tell them you have a right, OK you think a free thought, and then you can do according to your free thought. At that time, [if] your deeds disrupt other people, other's rights, that is no good. And also if your deeds disrupt yourself, that is no good, so your deeds if your deeds do not disrupt any other people, you can do freely [sic]. That is according to my school rules. (U Nayaka)*

U Nayaka is conversant with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and has attended training with UNICEF and received funding from them for elements of his school program. His simple explanation of some of the fundamental philosophical foundations of rights discourse is refreshing and clear and is very closely linked to Buddhist teaching, as described in the previous chapter. This has a profound impact upon the way in which children are treated in his school, as well as on the way in which children themselves relate to others. Age, gender and physical maturity become secondary to wisdom and enlightenment.

Freedom of thought is evident in some structural ways in the school, for example, through the election (by children) of their own class monitors. In the Rangoon monastery, it was most evident in the reciprocal sense of duty and responsibility between adults and novices. Novices would go about their duties and chores without the need for any kind of enforcement. Adults would provide their education and ensure their other needs (health, nutrition, social) were met. There was an expectation that everyone needed to play their respective role for the 'greater good'.

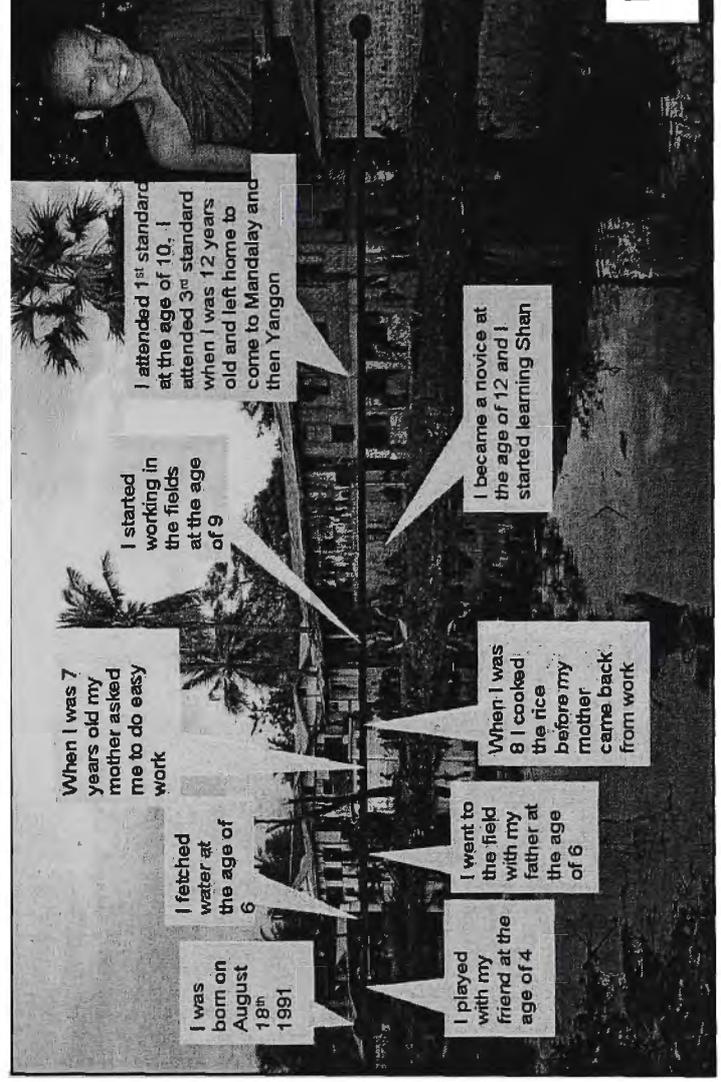
A novice at Thoun Htat Kyaung has very few possessions. Each owns a small chest in which he keeps his belongings, usually a spare set of robes, soap, toothbrush, books, perhaps a picture of his family or other keepsakes that he has collected along the way. Stretched out on the floor, next to his chest, is a thin woven sleeping mat, with a neatly folded blanket. A mosquito net, trussed and tied with plastic string to nails or wire, is suspended above the sleeping mat, ready to be unfolded each night. The relatively deprived nature of the novices' lives does not

appear to negatively affect their overall happiness or their approach to study. The novices have come from different parts of Burma, usually from isolated pockets of Shan State or the Wa region, and had found their way to the school with one goal in mind: to get an education. The life lines (Figure 10) are illustrative of the kind of life events that most of the boys have experienced. Kham Lu and Sai Saw Maung originate from different parts of Shan State and Maung Soe Oo from Mandalay Division. In many parts of Shan State, schooling beyond primary level is possible for most students only if they leave home. Even the basic data collected from these lifelines provides some relevant insight into expectations around childhood. Each of the boys had early memories of contributing to the family in small ways, either through work, such as collecting water, or by joining in religious ceremonies. Both San Lu and Saw Maung were working with and, for the family, in a paid capacity from the age of 9 or 10. All three boys left home at a young age to become novices (between ten and twelve) and this was a decision that *they* made with their parents. All three boys saw the opportunity to study at Phaung Daw Oo as a chance to create better futures and all had very clear aspirations. Two of them planned to return and to work in the school and the other wanted to become an engineer. As illustrated by Soe Oo's comments regarding returning to school, they all felt a duty to assist their parents to try to ease the hardship of rural life.



Maung Soe Oo Life-line

Saw Maung Life-line



Kham Lu Life-line

Figure 9 Novice Life Lines

Life for the novices in the monastery is arguably harsh, although they are diligently cared for by a small team of monks, students and volunteer teachers. Their day, outlined in Figure 11 on the following page, begins at 4.00 a.m. when they wake to prepare breakfast. Duties around the monastery that include sweeping, cleaning and washing, begin at 5.00 a.m. and are followed by an early breakfast. As with all novices around the country, they leave the monastery to collect alms for the day, returning only at 9.30, in just enough time to begin their school lessons, which go throughout the day. The evening time is spent doing jobs again, as well as opportunity for play, prayers and study. As monks and novices are not permitted to eat after noon, the last meal of the day, at around 11.30 in the morning, must be sufficient to see them through the remainder of the day and night until the routine begins again the next day. Daily prayer and meditation appeared to play a significant role in the lives of the novices and was promoted as a means of dealing with the stresses of everyday life and of developing wisdom and patience.

Although the majority of children in the country, whether novices or not, have very few possessions, the added discipline of the religious life makes circumstances for teenage boys seem quite implausible to an observer with a 'western democratic' perspective. These are not expectations placed on many teenagers in other countries, yet there they are, boys who are happy, studious, polite, interested, articulate, engaged, almost the antithesis of what we might expect of teenagers as constructed in our common Western discourse of childhood development. After many hours of observation and interaction with the novices, it seemed that they were genuinely happy about their circumstances and that they even considered themselves privileged. There was seldom the need for any imposed discipline to



maintain this daily regimen; instead things got done (cleaning, jobs, study, cooking, play and recreation) with a minimum of fuss, few arguments, in fact seldom even a raised voice. When questioned about this state of calm, the novices were somewhat bemused that I would think things might be any different.

Another obvious dynamic was the sense that these boys had about being a part of a religious order. They took pride in adjusting their appearance each morning before setting off to collect alms. They took their daily prayers seriously and they listened to and respected their elders and teachers. Yet they also questioned and gave their opinions and were allowed the space to show their youthful exuberance for activities such as playing soccer in the dusty courtyard of the monastery. This was a particularly popular pastime. The mutual respect between novices and their teachers was a vital



Picture 6- A novice ready to set out to collect alms

element in the functioning of the monastery. Although it was expected that the boys fulfilled their responsibilities around the monastery, the same expectation was made of the adults.

Novices did not play a substantial role in the day to day decision-making processes of the monastery, although the choice to move from the Mandalay school to pioneer the Rangoon monastery was entirely theirs. Interview findings suggested that this decision was based on a number of factors, including interest, a feeling of importance, and a sense of adventure. Most importantly, they demonstrated a

great sense of duty and responsibility to their families and seeking an education to benefit their families was a primary motivation for most of the boys. This respect was also directed at the people who cared for them in the monastery and to each other. Academic achievement, active participation, and contribution to the monastery were highly valued. Even though this sense of responsibility was encouraged, the novices were free to return to Mandalay or to decide to return home at any time. One novice, after completing a year in Rangoon, moved back to Mandalay and then decided to return to a different monastic school in Rangoon that would enable him to complete his education there. He took personal responsibility for the entire process<sup>23</sup>. This was indicative of the ability of the boys to create their own social networks, or at least to take advantage of those that already existed within the monastic system. The ability to connect to these social networks was also illustrated by the fact that a number of novices had been able to attract ongoing donations from အလှူရှင် (*a hlu shin* – donors) that enabled them to attend private tuition and to buy school supplies. All the novices survived on the generosity of the surrounding community as they begged for alms each day; an example of social capital deeply rooted within religious custom, through which, undoubtedly, many people are able to survive.

As U Nayaka does not see the possibility of short term political change or a sudden blossoming of democracy, the underlying philosophy of the school has a long-term intent. U Nayaka believes very firmly that educated children, capable of independent and reasoned thought, will create a more enlightened future and his school is an investment in that. As would be expected, however, given the nature

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<sup>23</sup> He later returned to the school in Mandalay to continue his education, not happy with his new environment

of the military authorities, such intent, no matter how benign it might outwardly appear, can be dangerous. At the time of one of my visits to the school, the electricity supply had been cut for some days. U Nayaka, having many and varied roles within the school, decided to investigate the cause and we set out together in the school's car to find the linesman. In Burma this is common practice as he is crucial in the maintenance of the electricity supply (as a result of low wages, linesmen often cut the supply and wait for 'tea money' to be offered to them before they will turn it back on again). At some stage in the journey we passed a military truck, stopped by the side of the road, and armed soldiers glared nervously as we drove past. U Nayaka turned to me saying:

*They are afraid.... Because they have a gun!*

I cannot quite remember what became of our quest to find the linesman (no doubt we did and the power was restored) as I was distracted, contemplating the great truth behind this short statement and the potential danger in which U Nayaka, his school and his staff, were living and working in each day. A philosophy of free thought can lead very quickly to undermining authority: fear does not arise so much through the use of power, but from the threat of losing it and a fearful military regime can lead to severe consequences. To create a supportive operating environment, U Nayaka has needed to tread a very fine line with the authorities, attracting their patronage and support but not their control. He achieved this through advocating for the support of General Khin Nyunt (then Secretary One of the SPDC) who opened a number of the school buildings and this has enabled the school to expand its registration to high school status. U Nayaka does not seek to undermine the regime, however his belief in education is that, as people learn, they will see different options and alternatives to the present. This is a long term view of

a solution that can affect the current political deadlock that grips the country. Children play a crucial role in this vision; children who are able to analyse and make choices and be able to bring about change.

### *Buddhism beyond the monastery*

The role of Buddhist principles within the school was clear; they provided a guiding philosophy for all that occurred. However, one school does not necessarily reflect the view held within the wider community. To discover how Buddhist teaching was incorporated into life beyond the school environment, a number of interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. As Chapter Three observed, Buddhist teachings are open to interpretation and are often inextricably entwined with other traditional belief systems, such as spirit or 'Nat' worship (Houtman, 1999). However, it was evident from these data that many people attempted to live their lives according to Buddhist principles.

Daw Nwe Lwin Htwe lives in a small but well appointed apartment close to the inner city area of Rangoon. Working these days with a shipping business, her husband is often away and she has taken the major responsibility for raising their two teenage daughters. Nwe Lwin Htwe would be considered middle class. She has an education and a small printing business and she speaks proudly of the role that the business played in reporting pro-democracy activities in the late 1980s. This resulted in her husbands' imprisonment for some years and in the closure of the presses, but she has opened them again, although political reporting is necessarily a thing of the past. In the corner of the main room where we sit, a Buddhist altar presides over the house. There are pictures of grandparents and lights and

offerings. Buddhism has been an important influence in Nwe Lwin Htwe's life, particularly when she was a child:

*My parents gave us some freedom. We could decide whatever we like but we have the responsibility for the consequences....They never said, 'Don't do this' but 'please think it over'....When I became older every time I asked my father, 'should I do this?' He said, 'Please think it over' he never said, 'don't do this'. If it was not right he said, 'Oh I think this is not right but if you want to do this you can but you are responsible for the consequences.' I took their suggestion because I only have my father and mother....I like this way. We Buddhists like this way. Buddhist parents are like that. A majority of the Burmese Buddhists are like that. We informed our parents about everything but doing or not was up to us. I think this is a good way. Now I am doing this way to my children now I am in the position of a parent [sic].*

The attitude of Nwe Lwin Htwe's parents and those that she has taken on as her own, reinforce the idea of personal responsibility for one's own actions. As with U Nayaka's ideas of free thought, there is a deep sense of guiding, rather than being told, and of allowing children to find their own way, albeit within the safety of parental advice and open communication. In Nwe Lwin Htwe's family there is a relationship between the amount of personal freedom that she gives her daughters and the decisions that she encourages them to make. She believes very strongly in responsibility towards the family and the community and so involves them in decision-making that will affect the family as in the example below:

*Not long ago, we were searching for a plot of land and we found it. My husband did not like it much but I liked it a lot. What we did was to take our daughters to show them the land and took their advice. We all voted and based on the vote, decided. We do everything the same way.*

Personal freedoms, on the other hand, are secondary and more closely guarded and monitored. She worries about what her daughters wear when they go out, particularly the older one, who she sees as headstrong and always wanting her own way:

*For example, if they go to tuition where the boys also attend, they have to be careful about what they wear. I don't want them to wear trousers and skirts. I do not know when they get older and when they attend school abroad but now it is under my guardianship and we live in Burma. If it is not right in my eyes, how can it be good in other people's eyes? For example, when they go to Blazon [shopping centre] without me to see a musical stage show, if they go without me I tell them to dress carefully because I don't know how to say that there are many good and bad people around.*

Nwe Lwin Htwe and her husband see Buddhism as a vital element of their own lives but not something that can be imposed on their daughters:

*What my husband said to my daughters is that you don't need to be Buddhist because of us. I want you to know what Buddhism is. My elder daughter went to retreat not long ago. She said that she wanted to do some meditation on her birthday. So I sent her to the meditation centre. In fact, I really want my two daughters to be ordained as 'Thi La Shin' (nun) because I don't have any son to do 'Shin Pyu'. But I never force them so they don't want to!*

Instead she teaches Buddhist principles by example. She tells me of the nunnery that she has founded in Dagon, a poor satellite township of Rangoon and to which she donates now on a regular basis:

*I frequently make donations so my daughters said they would emulate me. When they grow up they will do the same. They really wish they will do the same. I told them that if they want to they can. And I told them that they should purify their minds and do whatever they can.*

*And I said that reciting the scripture and praying every day is not necessary.*

Another respondent, Aung Thein Kyaw, points out that while, in general, people believe that Buddhism demands that children are brought up not to question their elders, that 'true' Buddhism is different:

*The main thing is that we are not allowed to question our elders and teachers but in fact even our Lord Buddha allowed us to do so.*

These attitudes were common amongst middle class Burmese parents who were interviewed. This was despite an acknowledgement that culture often dictated that things should be different. May Ohn, a staff member from an International NGO, spoke of her own upbringing in the following manner:

*In the family, you know you have to pay respects to the elder brothers and sisters and if you happen to be the youngest...it is something I never liked. But my father he is flexible and he never controlled us that much...I could talk to my father about many things, like for example my future plans, even about marriage.*

There is, however, another side to religious belief, as was argued in Chapter Three. Schober (2005) which suggests that since the pro-democracy uprisings in 1988 and the establishment of the present military regime, that two competing interpretations of Buddhism have emerged. One reflects the nationalistic centralised authority of the regime and benefits from their patronage; a tool for powers of the state in the absence of any other moral authority. The other interpretation sees Buddhism very much as a vehicle of social engagement and responsibility. Schober (2005)

equates the latter interpretation with democratic change, observing that it focuses on personal and social engagement, ethics and meditation, which are qualities, she argues, that are espoused by Aung San Suu Kyi. However, as U Nayaka's school indicates, the division between the two is not always clear cut, as the patronage of General Khin Nyunt, clearly a figure of regime authority, was a crucial element in the schools growth and influence, itself, clearly an example of social change.

However, there appears to be a growing public mistrust of the military's influence over the Buddhist sangha. The following newspaper article from the New Light of Myanmar (the regime's English language daily) illustrates the way in which the military pay homage to the sangha, while at the same time ensuring their loyalty through the donation of substantial gifts:

*RANGOON, 14 Sept - Families of Defence Services (Army, Navy and Air) and well-wishers this afternoon donated rice, edible oil, salt, medicine, gram and cash ... Secretary-2 Adjutant-General Lt-Gen Thein Sein attended the donation ceremony and presented provisions.*

*Chairman of Rangoon Division Peace and Development Council Commander of Rangoon Command Maj-Gen Myint Swe, Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Maj-Gen Sein Htwa, the vice-mayor, senior military officers, departmental officials, chairmen of Rangoon District (West), Kamayut and Kyimyindine townships peace and development councils and well-wishers also attended the ceremony. First, the congregation received the Five-Precepts from Kyimyindine Township Sangha Nayaka Committee Chairman Sayadaw Agga Maha Pandita Bhaddanta Pañinda.*

*Next, Lt-Gen Thein Sein, Maj-Gen Myint Swe, and senior military officers presented offertories to the members of the Sangha.*

*Next, senior military officers, the commander and well-wishers presented provisions to Sayadaws (New Light of Myanmar, Monday 15th September)*

A number of participants noted that the sangha had lost its independence and that it was increasingly seen as a tool of the regime. There was a feeling that the gentle and reflective nature of Buddhism and the belief in 'karma' leaves people open to exploitation. This is a double edge sword, simultaneously helping people cope with their suffering, while making them more pliable and easier to control. As one respondent (Than Zaw) claimed:

*The government knows the weakness of the people; they know how to use the gentleness of their religion to control them (Than Zaw, 32 year old male respondent from Yangon).*

However, despite the military's increasing control over the sangha, Burmese continue to find strength and refuge in Buddhism and Buddhist ritual and Buddhist teaching remains a great defining influence over the way in which children are treated and childhood is defined.

### *Stages of Life*

Besides Buddhism, the 'narrative' influences over childhood are affected by culturally biased understandings of what it means to be an adult, a youth and a child. Chapter Two provided detail about the different ways in which children and childhood have been perceived over the centuries and postulated that Piaget's (1950) theory of different developmental stages and similar notions, by others, such as Vygotsky (1962), still provide the basis of our understandings of childhood in the Western world. More recently study into the sociology of childhood (for example James et al., 1998) is bringing the dominance of such developmental theories into

question. The application of these emerging theoretical models to non-Western environments has been limited, although Bissell (2003), for example, has looked at the social construction of childhood in Bangladesh. However, an analysis of that depth is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is important to recognise the way in which Burmese people differentiate between childhood and adulthood and the way in which this differentiation is constructed. An analysis of this type will engender a clearer understanding of the cultural expectations of children's contribution and participation within the family and community context. This, in turn, will assist in clarifying what might be acceptable or unacceptable, from a cultural perspective, within the confines of a development project. The following section seeks to do that through analysing data collected from key informant interviews, focus groups and participatory activities with both adults and children.

### *The Child*

Nay Nay Lay is 16 and lives with her grandmother. She has no parents. She lives in Hlaingtharyar, one of the satellite townships just outside of Rangoon. It was established following the student uprising in 1988. Many of the people living in Hlaingtharyar were relocated from slum areas in Rangoon. They were sold land quite cheaply and had to develop it, including water and sanitation systems, roads and electricity. Today, many people rent in Hlaingtharyar, unable to afford rooms or houses closer to the city. Most houses do not have power or water. During the wet season roads flood and are washed away. Even houses built on stilts to escape high water are sometimes partially submerged after heavy downfalls. One gets the impression in Hlaingtharyar that people are merely camping temporarily.

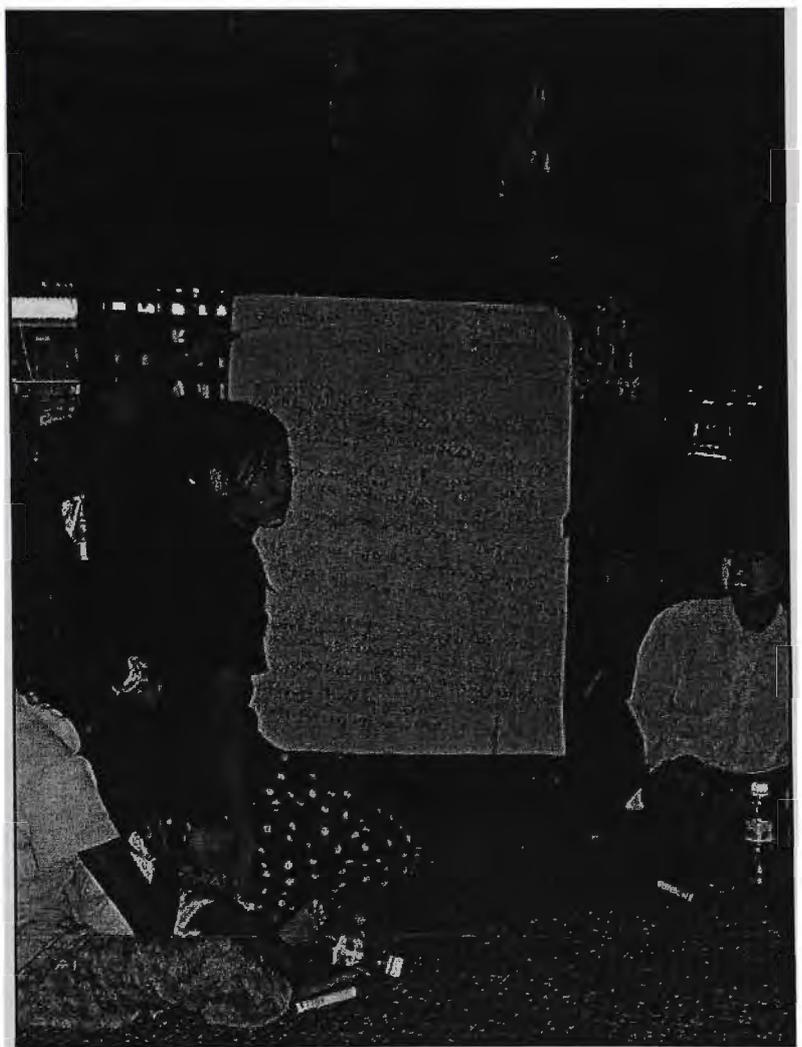
A group of 15 young people aged between 12 and 17 sit on the floor around me in a circle, in a World Vision Myanmar community centre, and we talk about the past, the present and their aspirations for the future. Most of these young people are part of a World Vision Myanmar project to prevent poor children drifting on to the streets in search of work. The program had been running for some two and a half years. It aims to assist poor families through small business loans, assistance with school fees and skills training for employment and non-formal education activities for children who cannot go to school at all. The group are either attending some kind of skills training or working in one of the many factories in the industrial area on the other side of the town.

Nay Nay Lay and her peers can remember many of the changes to the community since it was first established. The children tell me that when they arrived thirteen years ago there were no roads, nor school, and there were great distances between houses. Basic services such as electricity were non-existent and it was a long hour's walk to fetch water from the reservoir. Even buying food was problematic, as there was no market nor stores close by. Medical complaints were taken to the only (poorly resourced) hospital in the vicinity, and there were no clinics. Access to Rangoon itself was hard, as when they first settled, there was no bridge and all travel to the capital was by boat down the Hlaing River. There were local authorities, along with a monastery. Finding work was also difficult, as there was no industry to speak of.

Now the children report that it is more prosperous. Small unsealed roads (primarily for walking) have been built, making the major arterial roads to Rangoon more

accessible and two bridges have been built across the river, enabling road travel to Rangoon. Water pumps have been installed, usually by international NGOs, delivering a supply of clean water. There are now market stalls where it is possible to buy food and there are factories for employment. The population has increased and housing has become more established. Overall, the children see many improvements.

Nay Nay Lay reports that being a child in Hlaingtharyar brings many challenges. She gets up each day at 5 a.m. to cook the rice and to clean the house. She lives with her grandmother; her parents having died some years ago. She is the only child with her grandmother and so she has to do a lot of the work around the house. After cleaning, she cuts the fire wood and sets it to dry outside then goes to the closest well to fetch water for the day. Nay Nay Lay washes the clothes and takes a



Picture 7 - Research activities with Nay Nay Lay and other young people in Hlaingtharyar

bath herself. Once she has done all this it is 9.00 a.m. and she goes to work. Work is a World Vision Myanmar training program set up for girls and young women who

no longer attend school. There she learns how to sew and gets paid for the work that she does, generally making blankets for the local market. Each day Nay Nay Lay earns about 300kyat, which is about equivalent to the wage of a construction site worker but not nearly as tiring or dangerous, so she considers herself quite fortunate. She gives all she earns to her grandmother who, in turn, gives her everything that she needs. Work is from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with an hour for lunch. Nay Lay enjoys the time she spends there, as she has friends and can make some money. When she has finished she returns home to cook, then takes a bath and has dinner with her grandmother. She likes to talk with her grandmother while they eat. She cleans up after they finish and is in bed between 10 and 11 p.m. each night.

Nay Nay Lay is not unlike other children in Hlaingtharyar or in other poorer townships around Rangoon. As has already been observed, many children live in even more difficult circumstances. As illustrated by the story above, Nay Nay Lay's life is very different from a teenage girl in Australia or in the United Kingdom, Europe or America. Indeed, comparing childhoods across such cultural divides is problematic and preconceived notions of childhood brought about by Western scientific thought cannot be wholly applied. It is important, therefore, to appreciate what Burmese children and their parents and communities understand childhood to be, not simply through the application of foreign norms and expectations. To that end, children and parents interviewed were asked to reflect on experiences, definitions, and culturally defined norms and values around childhood.

Adult respondents were asked to consider both their own childhood and that of their children and to identify interpretations around what it means to be a child, a youth and an adult. Not surprisingly, there were differing opinions. In Hlaingtharyar some parents, notably those who had been exposed to child rights education programs<sup>24</sup> answered from birth up to eighteen as the age of a child but others disagreed. Some mentioned from birth to 9 or 10, others up to twelve. U Nayaka acknowledged that there are many definitions of childhood but suggested that a strongly held belief in Burma is in customary law, which delineates childhood up to the age of thirteen. Most did not assign a chronological age but spoke rather of the things that children do:

လွတ်လွတ်လပ်လပ်နေမယ် (*Hlu hlu lat lat nay me- live free*)

Or by the fact that children can not identify what is good and what is bad nor, in Buddhist terms, what are good and bad deeds:

အကုသိုလ်နှင့် ကုသိုလ် *Ahku and ku do*

Buddhism was a major influence on defining childhood to parents in Hlaingtharyar. They saw children being defined as those unable to comprehend the Buddha's teachings:

*Children do not know the Buddhist Dhama*

*They do not understand Buddhist principles of giving*

Some parents felt that children were those who had not yet grasped the importance of other people's property or who did not have a concept of economics, giving the example that they demand things that they wanted, not understanding the financial constraints or whether or not their parents had sufficient financial resources. Some intimated that childhood depended in part on socio-economic status and that the

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<sup>24</sup> Through World Vision Myanmar programs in the community

need for children to begin to take on more adult-like roles grew out of economic necessity:

*In our community we are not rich, that is why 14 year old boys need to start cooking and doing household chores and for girls, from 10 they need to begin to cook and do house work...for the rich they only go to school and study, they don't do house work. They start to work and take responsibility after they get married*

Others felt that children were characterised by an apparent lack of respect for elders:

*They don't know how to respect elders; they just speak when they want to!*

Some qualified childhood by the gaining of wisdom that accompanied a certain age:

*They do not have wisdom yet, all they know is how to eat, drink and watch videos. But they will start to understand when they reach 18 or 19. Then they will identify what is right and what is wrong.*

It is clear from such comments that, while most parents equated childhood with the period of life between birth and puberty, the majority did not dwell on its chronological aspect. Rather they saw childhood as a stage characterised by limited responsibility and by a general lack of empathy for those around them. Their distinction made between the socio-economic statuses of families indicated that the construction of childhood was affected by poverty and economic circumstance. Once the child began to take on responsibility for contributing to the household income, the days of childhood were numbered.

### The Adolescent

Logic would dictate that if, in the Middle Ages in Europe, there was no childhood (as discussed in Chapter Two), then there would also not have been a period of adolescence. Such observations were made early in the last century. For example

Hollingworth (1928), who noted that it was only at the time during which children were taken out of the work place (usually factories) and institutionalised in school, that adolescence became recognised as a distinct phenomenon. Adolescence in the West is generally seen as a time of transition and even rebellion, when children, seemingly overnight, turn from being pleasant and helpful into grunting, non-communicative, unsociable beings (Parry, 2005). Empirical data collection suggested that in Burma, the period between childhood and adulthood, was identifiable as a time of physical and emotional change that took place somewhere around the age of 14 or 15. A number of common Burmese phrases were used to describe this period of life, mostly relating to the blossoming or growth of trees:

အပျိုပေါက် *A pyou bau – a girl in the bloom of maidenhood*

လူပျိုပေါက် *Lu pyou bau – a male adolescent, a stripling*

မြီးကောင်ပေါက် *Myi gaung bau – a fledgling*

Parents observed that adolescents would begin to talk back to their elders and that they needed more control. At the same time, parents became more understanding of the moods of children at this age, saying that they needed to be soothed more and that being rough would not have any affect:

*If you are rough they just do what they would like to. Especially those who are very shy. If you are rough with them they get worse.*

Parents felt that it was good for adolescents to have a sense of shame as this would help them control themselves. They acknowledged that disciplining adolescents was more difficult than children. Some parents suggested that there were two kinds of teenagers, those who are difficult to manage and those who follow their parents' advice. For some, they felt it was possible to be strict and

autocratic but that parenting for most needed encouragement and cajoling. Some felt that a kind of 'good cop/bad cop' approach was useful, in Burmese, *ချော့တလှည့်* *ချောက်တလှည့်* (*kyaw ta le; chau ta le* soothe them; make them scared). However, in most cases, parents felt that children did not respond to rough treatment, *'if you soothe them, they will work more'*, remarked one respondent. According to Buddhist teaching, they saw their duty as parents to tell adolescent children what is right and wrong and they agreed that both children and adolescents liked to be pampered by their parents.

Adolescence was marked by an interest in the opposite sex for both boys and girls. It was seen as a time when they would want to be with friends, where girls spent time making themselves look attractive and boys liked to spend more time away from home and began imitating their fathers.

Days for residents of Hlaingtharyar are long and often arduous. As a result there was little time for parents and children to actually sit and talk together. When there was opportunity, parents said that they generally discussed financial matters relating to the future of the family, with older children. With younger children, pocket money was often discussed. Parents also spent time talking about how their children might decide what is right and wrong and encouraging them to learn from their experiences of the day. Parents said they often found particular companionship with the older child of the family, in discussing more serious issues affecting the family wellbeing, a sign of adolescents being drawn into the adult world of responsibility.

In comparing their own childhoods to those of their children, parents felt that the most obvious difference was fear; that when they were young they were scared of their own parents. Now they say children and young people 'don't speak back but they don't listen and they don't care'. This difference was attributed to outside influences, particularly the video huts. Allot (1994) notes that thousands of video parlours have opened up around the country and Skidmore (2004) concludes that their popularity is due to the escapism provided by entering the world of cinema. Video huts are simple affairs, usually a small shack that can be blacked out with plastic sheeting, with a television and video, often powered only by a car battery. While a lot of the films shown in these video huts are locally made drama, imported films, including hard core pornography are common. Although such films are officially banned in Burma, these rules are rarely enforced. As a result, parents felt that foreign films had brought about a greater awareness of sex, illustrated by the fact that children talked about sex at home now. Parents reflected that when they were young they were not allowed to join in with adult conversations. They were not even allowed to listen but now they felt that it was much more open:

*They have more knowledge and even talk about HIV openly. Nowadays children are becoming more daring to do whatever they like. Before boys did not dare to give love letters to girls and did not easily have a girl friend. It is much easier now and easier to get pregnant!*

### The Adult

Out of all of the 'stages' of life, perhaps most enlightening in terms of defining childhood was more the question of what defines an adult in Burmese society. In the eyes of parents in Hlaingtharyar, adulthood meant marriage, something that usually happened after the age of 18, although not everywhere:

*Children get married at a very young age but in Hlaingtharyar they don't. In Hlaingtharyar most of the girls work in the industrial zone and most of the boys work as casual labourers. In the morning the girls rush to the factory and if they are late their salary will be cut. In the evening when they get home it is already dark and they are exhausted and hungry so they do not have time to think of boyfriends or marriage.*

Parents said that the majority of girls in the community were working in the garment factories well before they reached the age of 18.

Other respondents added further insight, Thiha for example saw adulthood as being able to 'stand on your own two feet' but that this was generally not solely dependent on the child:

*Many people even though they are 20 or older do not see themselves as an adult. They think they are immature and not ready to stand on their own. When I was 18 I did not see myself as an adult. I could not make decisions. From 19 I could do that, when my mother told me that I should think on my own and do things on my own. Most parents do not do and say these kinds of things to their children, they still want their children to stay with them. Even when young people are 25 they are still with the parents. They only leave home when they get married and then a lot of people still even stay with their parents... People think they are an adult when they can do whatever they want.*

A focus group discussion with adult staff from World Vision Myanmar suggested that adults were defined by appearance, characterised by wearing adult clothes and having physical stature; by achievement characterised by working 'for their own good', holding down a job, supporting parents, by being over 18 and married; by intellectual ability characterised by having passed the final year of school; and by the ability to think independently, characterised by being able to solve problems and

make decisions on their own. A number of adult respondents felt that a person became an adult when they left home, usually for marriage, but that in the parent's eyes, their children would always be children. It should be acknowledged that even adults are, in reality, unable to make many decisions or, more precisely, that their ability to make decisions is bound by the constraints of the political system. The years of socialist and military rule, combined with a culture that defers to those superior in age and education, has meant that initiative and personal responsibility for making decisions is neither encouraged nor, in general, sought out by people.

In summary then, most respondents initially found the categories of child, adolescent and adult easy to define. However, further investigation revealed that definitional boundaries were often blurred and the reality of childhood sometimes appeared to be contrary to what was culturally ascribed. This was possibly due to the reliance adults placed on religion and on their own memories of a happy childhood, in the face of an oppressive political system that deprived them of being able to treat their own children in the way that they would like.

### *Cultural concepts*

The final element of the 'narrative realm' deals with what I have termed cultural concepts. The Burmese language is rich in metaphor and contains countless terms and expressions that defy direct translation into English. Many are embedded in Buddhist belief systems and describe certain ways of social and emotional behaviour and interaction. Others are less related to religion but share a similar historical and cultural depth. It is not the intention of this section to look at all such concepts. Rather, some specific examples will be examined, to show how significantly they can affect interpersonal relationships, including those between

adults and children and the way in which they might contribute to behavioural patterns and the construct of childhood.

အားနာတယ် ah-na-de

Ah-na-de stems from a feeling of respect for others and the wish not to hurt the feelings of others or upset them due to one's own action. It is a common term in Burmese; one hears it everywhere, everyday. Primarily the concept of ah-na-de is a selfless response to a situation, one that reflects the reluctance of the individual to cause harm or upset to someone else. Ah-na-de is illustrated in the following story about Zin Min Oo (pictured opposite), a street child who had been abandoned by his mother at a railway station in Mandalay when he was around 10 years old.



Picture 8 - Zin Min Oo

He eventually tracked her down in Rangoon some months later:

*I found where she was working and told her that I wanted to live with her but she said that the people she worked for did not want to have her children around so she was going to leave. But I felt so sorry for her so I decided to leave instead.*

Zin Min Oo related how he then left his mother and eventually found his way to the World Vision Myanmar street children's centre. He had not seen her since. It is difficult to be conclusive about how children can make such deeply felt emotional decisions, particularly when they are related in the course of an interview. Perhaps he did not like his mother but that would be unlikely, as he found his way back from Mandalay to Rangoon by train, alone and sought her out. Perhaps he was not made welcome in the home in which his mother working, perhaps even thrown out. However, the use of *ah-na-de* translated here as 'feeling sorry', gives some clue. The term implies that one does or does not do or say something that might cause

pain or injury, out of respect for someone else. So when Zin Min Oo was saying he felt sorry for his mother, he implied that he did not want to put her in a difficult situation, nor to make her 'lose face' in front of her employers. Obviously there could have been a vast array of factors contributing to this decision, or the possibility that the boy's mother did not want him. However, assuming an element of truth, the fact that Zin Min Oo left his mother is illustrative of the power and influence of such cultural and religious norms<sup>25</sup>.

### Respect

Respect is often seen as an integral part of Asian society (Fukuyama, 1998) and was mentioned frequently by respondents as an important aspect of child-adult relations.

*...there are some parents who are quite strict and you know there is a saying that you have to listen to your parents and normally, if you want to say something back to your parents, they think that it is wrong, you cannot say something back to your parents you cannot contradict them (Thiri)*

It is not only parents and grandparents and other immediate family that command respect; monks and teachers are particularly important:

*...and also there are teachers at school and they have to listen to their teachers, they can never contradict their teachers and sometimes even when the teacher is wrong, I mean that was my experience when I was at school, I know that the teacher was wrong but I didn't have a chance to say it (Thiri).*

Another respondent identified how difficult it can be to overcome such deeply entrenched cultural practices:

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<sup>25</sup> Following this interview, the World Vision project manager responsible for the street children's program where Zin Min Oo resided undertook to find the boy's mother and facilitate their reconciliation.

*I think the adults they do not want their children to speak out. The moment you get to school you are told to listen to your teacher and the moment you understand to interact with your parents you are told to listen to them. So that is the culture and it is very difficult to overcome all this (May Ohn).*

However, as with the influence of video huts discussed earlier in this chapter, there is an acknowledgement of change as a result of external influences, in particular for children in urban areas:

*It's changing because if you look at this generation, the kids are exposed to a lot of things you know like they have MTV and HBO. So I think the kids who have access to TV – kids in the cities [are] different but [for] kids in the rural areas they do not have the awareness (17 year old male respondent).*

Such observations could, no doubt, be made in most countries of the world, as increasing globalisation and mass media challenge many aspects of established culture and behavioural norms. However, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter there is an alternative reality; a negative side to the way in which customary practices, such as respect, are being affected, not by MTV or HBO but by the military regime. One example is the way in which giving gifts to teachers, a commonly accepted practice and a sign of respect, has, due to insufficient salaries, necessitated a reliance on such gifts. Now children are penalised if they do not provide their teachers with presents or attend after-hours tuition classes, where they must pay<sup>26</sup>:

*Grandmother gave me tuition but in 9th standard the teacher failed me because I did not attend the teacher's own tuition classes. I hate them, I don't care (17 year old female respondent)*

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<sup>26</sup> Even though the regime has attempted to stop this practice, it remains out of economic necessity.

This practice has gone even further and children attending school and university are able to buy their way through:

*It is so corrupt, you can buy marks; one for 20,000 kyat (Male 16 year old respondent)*

### *The narrative realm - conclusion*

The way in which the narrative of childhood is constructed in Burma has a great influence over the ability of children to participate. There are factors that both enhance and diminish the possibility of participation. Most importantly, there are both philosophical and practical facets of Buddhism that promote the respect of children. Enlightenment, a key concept, is neither dependent on age nor sex and the concept of free thought encourages children to make their own decisions and to be responsible for them. Simultaneously, there is generally found within Buddhist practice in Burma deference to elders that might lead to the exclusion of children from certain aspects of life. The life of the novices, however, suggests that more important than lines of cultural authority is the importance of mutual respect and the encouragement of 'free thought'. Both can lead to numerous 'participative opportunities' for children. On a more subliminal level, elements of Buddhism such as 'karma' encourage people to accept their current circumstances and remain silent; factors that detract from the development of an open and robust democratic society. To an increasing degree, Buddhism is becoming a tool of the state. As the regime has found ways in which to dominate the Sangha and control outspoken monks, it has sought to influence and control the masses, and, simultaneously to legitimatise their own existence.

Common understandings about childhood, adolescence and adulthood also have an impact on the ability of children to participate in Burmese society. Although some adults consulted had an awareness of the CRC, most did not. Burmese law (as described in Chapter Three) defines a child as being up to the age of 16 and customary law to 13. There is also the conflicting attitude that one remains a child until married and living separately from parents, which could happen at a very young age or, alternatively, not at all. There is a feeling that modern influences, such as video halls, have had an impact on the way children behave, and in their knowledge about what has been seen in the past as an adult domain, particularly around issues of sexuality. At the same time there is acknowledgement that children, especially in more rural areas, tend to marry and have children of their own at a very young age. This indicates an acceptance of children into the adult world and, by inference, expectation that they will participate as an adult.

Findings show that definitions of childhood vary according to a number of pertinent variables. The economic status of the family and the degree of responsibility children take for family income generation is a very strong determinant of when children come to be seen as adult. Closely associated with this is the opportunity to stay in school. School children are, on the whole, dependent upon their family for support, although many school children also work part time. However, it can be concluded that there is some correlation between the degree of economic productivity of a child and the amount of influence over family affairs. For working children, living with a boy or girl friend is not uncommon and 'being married' in this way is another key indicator of adulthood.

Gender was another factor that influenced the degree to which children were treated in a more 'adult-like' fashion. Girls generally took more responsibility in the home, cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings and often being the first to leave school for paid work, to supplement the family income. From this perspective, they were treated more like adults than boys who, in general, experienced a greater degree of freedom. Overall, childhood in Rangoon could not be seen as a uniform entity. The nature of 'childhoods' was dependent upon social, economic and political realities, despite the culturally ascribed narrative of what it means to be a child. This led to a variety of experiences for children, some which involved considerable responsibility for themselves and their family members.

### *The socio-political realm: maintaining the collective illusion*

*Last year I had to volunteer to dissect a frog on Khin Nyunt's<sup>27</sup> visit to our school. I had never done this before so had to practice for a week before hand. The Education Minister also came and noticed how nervous I was and observed that I had never done this in school before. It was like, we are lying to them and they are lying to us. Everyone knows the situation but no one does anything about it. (Zaw Win, male medical student, age 17)*

In the beginning of this chapter I referred to the collective illusion of Burmese society: an existence that has been created both through the stringencies of military rule, as well as the overt pretence of normality created by a people who understand their oppression but who cannot see any way from which to escape it. There is, therefore, an illusion of calm and peacefulness in Rangoon. To the casual visitor, the city appears like many in the Third World: friendly and welcoming people; busy

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<sup>27</sup> Khin Nyunt was then Prime Minister.

and bustling; lots of noise and traffic; and a sense indeed that things are on the move. It is a good disguise.

As Chapter Three argued, there is a deep sense of fear and desperation felt by many people. However, it is no accident that a naïve outsider visiting Burma for a brief holiday would not recognise this and be surprised to discover that the reality is very different to that which they first observe. Indeed, life for many is a carefully constructed façade and there is complicity around maintaining a collective illusion that all is well. During the wet season of 1997 for example, following severe floods north of Rangoon around the Bago area, thousands of villagers left their homes and fled to the high ground surrounding the railway line. The Minister responsible for disasters and relief made a trip to the area by train to survey the damage and the impact on the populace. All those sheltering around the railway line were moved away before he arrived so as not to upset the minister<sup>28</sup>. As a result, he deduced that the situation was not as serious as first reported. Had the minister been told of the real situation and allowed to see the extent of the impact of the flood on the people, his response may well have been different. The point of this story is not to excuse the minister for poor analysis but to point out the way in which people can become complicit in creating a façade that in the end risks becoming self-perpetuating.

The 'socio-political realm' in which children live includes the social, economic and political factors that impact upon the way in which children are treated within a society. This realm takes into account the institutional framework of a country as it

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<sup>28</sup> This was learned through personal experience when providing relief to flood victims as part of my work with World Vision Myanmar.

relates to children, particularly the education and the legal systems. It also includes policy factors more broadly such as the impact of law on child work, or economic policies and the way in which they impact upon families. Finally, the socio-political realm refers to the mechanisms through which policy is enacted at a practical day to day level within the community; through the media for example.

The following section will, therefore, provide an analysis of this socio-political factors that affect children and childhood, focussing particularly on the education system and on the economy, as these have perhaps the most significant impact on the lives of children. It will also highlight the way in which government propaganda is used to maintain the illusion of peace and tranquillity, using a number of examples particularly relevant to children, including the issue of child soldiers and the way in which the Myanmar Child Law is made operational.

### *The media – we have no child soldiers!*

The most blatant and constant reminder of this façade is the media, including the television, radio and the daily newspapers (the *Myanmar Ah Lin* and its English translation, the *New Light of Myanmar*). When I ask people about the media, they joke about the television channels as being green and gold; all you see are generals and pagodas. The *New Light of Myanmar* is often referred to derogatorily as, 'The Dim Light of Myanmar' (Skidmore, 2004).

Children are represented in a very superficial manner in the public media. On the television they appear in advertisements, usually chubby, smiling and pampered; the antithesis of the experience of most children in the country. In the written press

children are represented through stories about competitions for essay writing or national day poems. They are photographed in their school uniforms, neatly groomed and receiving prizes from a government (usually military) official. On very rare occasions, there may be an article relating to a UNICEF initiative around the CRC. Surprisingly, a recent article in the New Light of Myanmar reported on the inaugural meeting of the Committee for Preventing Recruitment of Child Soldiers (New Light of Myanmar, Saturday January 17th 2004) and it acknowledged the recruitment of child soldiers and the role of a committee established to halt this practice. Another referenced Myanmar's ratification of the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime and its protocol on Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children. Both of these issues were reported to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Daw May May Yi, 2004). Yet reports such as this are rare and generally ambiguous as can be seen below:

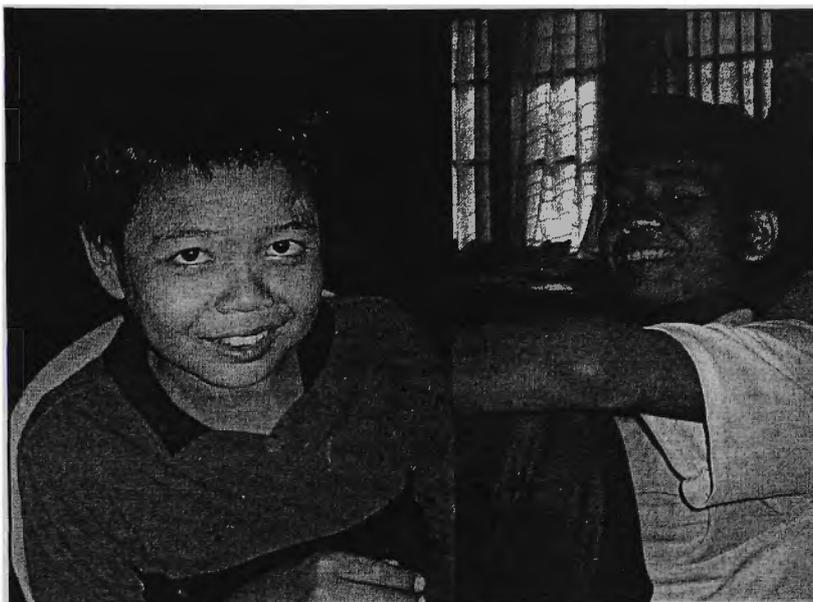
*The Government of Myanmar is deeply committed to the protection of children including the important issue of child soldiers. Under the Myanmar Defence Services Act of 1974 and War Office Council Instruction 13/73 a person cannot be enlisted into the armed forces unless he has attained the age of 18. Recently, a Committee for the Prevention of the Recruitment of Child Soldiers was established...The Committee at its first meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> January discussed ways and means to render strict observance of rules, regulations and directives concerning the prevention against recruitment of children for military service (Daw May May Yi, 2004 p 5).*

The report begs the question as to why there is a need for a committee for prevention of recruiting children if children are, by law, not able to enlist in the first place!

The recruitment of child soldiers however, continued as a practice. During the time that the World Vision drop-in-centre in Rangoon has been opened staff have documented well over 200

cases of boys (some as young as 10 years of age) being forcibly picked up or lured by the promise of food and clothes by military recruiters<sup>29</sup>.

Lyn Lyn spoke very openly about his experience, when interviewed as a part of this research. He was recruited at



Picture 9 - Lyn Lyn (left) as a child in the drop in centre and (right) on leave from the military six years later

around the age of fourteen, after having made contact with the World Vision Myanmar Street Children's program about a year before. According to staff, Lyn Lyn had always been a mischievous but very likeable boy. He tried to enter school and when that did not work attempted numerous small business ventures such as selling ice-water or betel nut. He often spoke about joining the military and one day, friends reported to World Vision staff that he had gone with a recruiter<sup>30</sup>.

Lyn Lyn reported that in many ways life in the military had been a positive experience. He had developed a sense of discipline and purpose and a pride in being in the military, 'now people respect me'. He had even saved a little money. He felt that he now belonged somewhere and acknowledged how he struggled to find that same sense of belonging while living on the street. However, there was a

<sup>29</sup> According to project records and staff interviews.

<sup>30</sup> I interviewed Lyn Lyn three years later when he visited World Vision Myanmar while on leave.

strangely distant expression in his eyes. As I probed further about his experiences in the army Lyn Lyn related how on his first raid on an enemy (Karen) village his platoon has been ordered to torch all the houses and crops and find everyone who remained, all men women and children. They gathered those who were not fortunate enough to escape and Lyn Lyn's commanding officer then pulled a knife from his belt, gave it to the boy and ordered him to slit the throat of one of the villagers. According to Lyn Lyn the villager was not an enemy soldier, he was ordered to do this as a rite of passage, to prove that he had the courage to kill. I asked Lyn Lyn how he felt about this. He said that he had no choice and would do it again if he had to. He spoke of nightmares but he tried to ignore those as much as he could.

World Vision Myanmar staff reported that they tried to find the boys who were picked up by the military and to get them back, sometimes successfully. I personally had this experience, when, on one occasion, along with some of the Burmese staff, we managed to track down a recruiting house and find four children from the drop-in-centre (all under twelve years old) who had been 'picked up' from the street. The house was at the back of a pagoda, just outside of Rangoon, and as we left with the boys in a van, the recruiting sergeant asked if we could give him a lift to his base, a kilometre down the road. He was most appreciative and told us that had he known the boys were 'our children' that they would never have been taken. He smiled and thanked us as he departed. The boys in the back of the bus heaved a noticeable sigh of relief.

Some staff tried to form relationships with recruiters and discovered that a main aim of their recruiting others was to enable their own resignation from the army. If they could bring in five new recruits they would be able to leave themselves. The fact that these recruits might be children seemed to have little bearing and many recruiters felt that the children were better off in the army than on the streets. Others saw no difference between recruiting an eighteen year old to a thirteen year old. One staff member reported speaking to a recruiter about the CRC, informing him that Burma was a signatory and explaining the relevance of this for military service. The recruiter appeared at the drop-in-centre a week later with a boy known to the staff. The boy had told him that he wanted to join the army and the recruiter had wanted to get the permission of the staff before proceeding!

In the end, however, the lives of street children are of little consequence for most people. They can disappear and often no-one cares or often even knows. Both children interviewed as a part of this research, as well as in documented cases that have been published elsewhere (for example Heppner, 2002), spoke of the arbitrary nature of conscription:

*...I was walking in the market and someone grabbed me.*

*...They asked me to come and have team with them; I was hungry so I did.*

*...I was just playing in the street and they took me away.*

It is not uncommon for many children not to know their birth date and they reported being threatened, prior to medical examinations for recruitment, to give a false age. Doctors pretend they are older, recruiters do the same and the children have little choice. It is children from poor communities and particularly children who are

obviously living on the street who seem most at risk. Often recruiters give them a choice, 'come with us or we will send you to a detention centre', was the way in which a number of street children said they were approached. Although World Vision Myanmar staff reported a decline in the incidence of recruitment following a Human Rights Watch report on the issue (Heppner, 2002) in 2002, the practice, according to personal communication with the ILO liaison officer in Burma, continues.

In most instances, the regime categorically denies the use of children in the army:

*The conspirators are framing the Tatmadaw<sup>31</sup> for the alleged forced recruitment of juvenile soldiers for the front lines, and trying to raise the matter at the UN for the global body to take action against Myanmar. Thus, the committee will have to pay attention to refuting the matter. Concerning the accusations of child soldiers, the Secretary-1 said that the Tatmadaw is an armed force systematically formed according to laws, bylaws, rules and directives, and also an institution with fine traditions. In accord with its rules and regulations, the Tatmadaw is enlisting only the persons who have reached the age of 18 and who meet the required standards, and they are the steadfast rules and regulations strictly adhered by the Tatmadaw. In 2004, the Tatmadaw invited the UNICEF resident representative to study the recruitment rules, orders and directives for Defence Services (Army) Recruiting Units in Rangoon and Mandalay and also to visit the recruits (New Light of Myanmar, 2005).*

The illusion is maintained, Myanmar has no child soldiers.

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<sup>31</sup> The Tatmadaw is the Armed Forces.

## *Educational 'excellence'*

Education is seen around the world as a vital part of a child's growth and development. Some time ago, the United Nations acknowledged the importance of universal access to basic education, pledging an 80% completion rate of primary school (UNICEF, 1990 p 12). In Burma, most recent estimates of the situation fail to live up to this commitment:

*Nearly half the school-age children never enrol, and only around 30 per cent complete five years of primary education (International Crisis Group, 2006 p 2)*

Older parents and grandparents who were interviewed spoke of the high standards of the education system when they were at school during the socialist era and they reflected on the declining standards of the present day. A focus group discussion with 17 year old students from one of the medical faculties in Rangoon<sup>32</sup> elicited the following:

*I thought that medical school would be not so bad but it turned out to be complete rubbish so I dropped out...Because it was under-resourced and there was bad teaching. Also I had to attend tuition. Mother had forced me to go initially but after 6 months let me leave (Nilar, 17 year old female medical student).*

*My situation is similar. There were no medical staff in the first year just generalists from the other faculties and they treated us like school students, not like we were at university. [That meant] parrot learning, it is very popular here and the only way to get good marks (May Lay, 16 year old female medical student).*

*Class sizes at the medical school were up to 300 in each class. Sometimes the microphones did not work so you could not even hear*

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<sup>32</sup> Many students begin university studies at the age of 16 or 17 as high school extends only to 10<sup>th</sup> standard.

*the lecturer. Sometimes the roof leaked. Everyone had to write the same thing, we didn't have to learn, just remember (Zaw Win, 17 year old male medical student).*

Like many aspects of life for children, education has become politicised. Following the pro-democracy uprisings in 1988, the government embarked on a policy of moving universities outside the central Rangoon area. The main universities in the middle of town were closed down. In the media, the government proudly reports the number of new universities that it has established. Students attend as they have little else to do and, therefore, contribute to a semblance of normality, often ignorant of the fact that life elsewhere might be different:

*...most other students don't know things in the outside world are different. Most people have limited information and are not interested; they don't want to be open to the outside world. To them scores in exams is the most important thing. Good marks mean good status and that the parents can brag about their children (Thidar, 17 year old female medical student).*

As with many countries, medical students in Burma are the elite and only those students with exceptional marks are selected for entry into medical school. By comparison to other disciplines of study, medical students seem well serviced by the state education system. Others do not fare so well. For example, Peter, a young 17 year old law student at the distance university, reported that he only needed to attend university twice or maybe three times a year. Once to pick up the questions and answers for the examinations, the second time, to sit the exam and a third time, if he failed the exam (not remembering the answers verbatim as was the requirement) to give a present to the examiner to enable his mark to be

'reconsidered'. Universities are open, teachers are there, students enrol, and the illusion is maintained.

Students in primary and secondary school are treated in a similar fashion, although there are of course many teachers wanting to actually pass on some learning to their students but who find themselves compromised by a system that denies them adequate pay. Phaung Daw Oo Monastic Education School, discussed earlier, is one example of a school and teachers who have been able to thrive, despite the status quo. Even though public education is ostensibly free, students need to pay a range of fees; each year a levy is taken – for books, for computers (despite not having electricity), for furniture and more. Many cannot afford this, as was the case with most parents interviewed in Hlaingtharyar.

Parents, who have the resources, pay large sums of money to get children into government schools that have a good reputation. This was the case with a number of middle class parents interviewed. However many wealthy parents have given up any hope in the public system and enrol their children in the growing number of private colleges that have appeared over the past seven or eight years.

Legally, only government schools can be registered, so these private colleges for the wealthy register as business or language training centres. The largest, ILBC (International Language and Business Centre) has three campuses, a student body of well over 1,500 and a number of foreign teachers. It advertises quite openly on national television. Two years ago, there was an attempt by some in the regime to close the college down, as it was operating contrary to laws that allowed only for

the state and monastic system to open schools. However, the folly of such a move was soon realised, as many of the children at the school were sons and daughters of the military or high ranking public servants. Those who can afford to, send their children overseas to Thailand, Singapore or Malaysia, some even further afield, although this generally happens once children have completed their high school years (10<sup>th</sup> Standard).

Not surprisingly, there is a sense of despondency about the education system:

*Even medical qualifications are not recognised overseas, before education was a very high standard...even kindergarten is overcrowded, there are 100 kids in each class. My younger brother is in the 6th Standard and has not had his book corrected once as the teacher simply does not have the time with so many children in the class...the pass rate in 10th standard last year was 93%, after independence it was between three & ten percent. (Zaw Win )*

Nilar and Zaw Win related that everyone passes now and that there is a feeling that even once accepted international principles around medical practice have been commandeered by the government, to meet its own purpose,

*The government has changed the Hippocratic Oath. It should be that doctors treat anyone who is sick or injured but they say they have discovered an ancient Myanmar Hippocratic Oath that says they should not treat people who are 'bad' (Nilar).*

For students and young people who question the system, there is little that can be done. May Lay remarked that she simply ignores it, that no one dares to question the system. Even her friends, she says, think she is too interested in foreign things

so she does not discuss her ideas with anyone, anymore, apart from a very small number who are like-minded:

*Government officials are uneducated and do not value education, my uncle was an economist and was fired because he disagreed with them...they [the government] do not think, they only want people who agree with them so they can maintain power (May Lay).*

The impact of educational policy on children and young people is immense. 'Lost generation' is a common phrase used to describe the young today. However, many who have lost their faith in the education system still see educated children as important. While most parents interviewed in Hlaingtharyar said that they felt education was more important than having a trade skill, they noted the limitations of the present situation. A number agreed that if children had a trade they would be able to stand on their own in the future.

Partly in order to enhance their school education, but primarily because they have little choice, most children attend tuition. This is run after school hours by teachers, who rely on the tuition fees to supplement their meagre wages (along with regular 'gifts' from students). Some years ago this practice was made illegal but teachers have no other choice and officials turn a blind eye. Children who do not go to tuition risk losing favour with their teachers, something that inevitably affects their marks:

*Those who can't afford tuition are left out in the rain (Thidar).*

Despite the obvious contradiction with the education system, pressure is put on to children to do well, both from parents as well as from other family members. There is much honour or, conversely, loss of face, dependent on a child's graduation marks:

*Family honour is very important, it is important to do well in exams, particularly to get into medicine, otherwise the whole family will see you as a failure (Thidar).*

Children seem to cope in different ways with the education system. Many drop out, particularly when poverty is an added factor. Others accept the state of the education system as normal, never having experienced anything different. For many students, however, the rules become too overbearing:

*So many rules are made but everyone breaks them. There is a culture of rule breaking. Some university students are starting to rebel and do things against the rules like wear their hair long and wear earrings (boys). Children are rebelling but in the wrong way. The rules are so detailed. Even the way you wear your bag should be over the shoulder, not across. Teachers don't care anymore as they have to survive themselves. If they discipline children, then the kids won't attend their tuition classes so they keep silent...(Zaw Win)*

Questioning any rules or part of the system is dangerous; it means that someone might be thinking. Partly this is culturally ascribed; Zaw Win noted that in the tenets of Buddhism, children are brought up to respect their elders, particularly teachers:

*But they change the meaning to say that we can't question them*

With the (relative) liberalisation of the economy that took place in 1992 and the limited introduction of computers and foreign media (particularly films) both children

and adults are falling under the influence of new thoughts and ideas. But what they learn is often tinged with a Hollywood reality,

*Parents see American movies showing the extremes of behaviour and then treat their children that way...there is no limit on the age kids can smoke and drink and often families encourage this...rules are there but they are not enforced (May Lay).*

Network gaming of war simulation games (such as 'Counter Strike') has become increasingly popular, particularly amongst boys. Game parlours are often owned by the military and they are encouraged, according to May Lay and Zaw Win, to keep young people distracted from politics. Tournaments are held and boys form clans in schools around the games, which sometimes result in real violence between opposing sides. Such 'gang warfare' conducted by children of the rich has, until a recent clamp down on such activity, been a common occurrence in the streets of Rangoon. Hapless police officers called to restore law and order generally end up simply diverting traffic around the clash, unable to arrest children of the military (as was observed by one foreign acquaintance from his balcony window and, on another occasion, by myself, one night while driving past the Kan Daw Gyi Lake Hotel in Rangoon).

Another function of the education system has been as a means of control over ethnic minority states, where all instruction is conducted in Burmese and ethnic languages are not permitted for instruction. Schools are an avenue for recruitment to the government sponsored mass organisations, notably the USDA. Children must join and those who become active receive incentives and rewards, sometimes in the form of better grades. Through such organisation and the constant propagandising in the history books and large billboards that adorn the major

roadways, children from a young age, are taught to believe in the might and achievements of the military. For many boys, as in other societies, the idea of becoming a soldier holds a certain mystique and a sense of romantic adventure. The vast majority of boys coming to the World Vision street children drop-in-centre in Rangoon, despite often being treated badly by the military, said they wanted to join the army when they grew up.

This is illustrative of the state of education in Burma; an intricate net of subtle power relations, teacher, to child, to parent. It is a system that thrives on corruption, not of seemingly grand proportions but something more subtle and banal that seeps in to pervert the cultural values of respect and honour upon which Burmese society has been built, a system in which both exploiters and the exploited play their role in preserving. Underlying this is ignorance or, more accurately, pretence, that nothing is wrong. For once fault is recognised, one is forced to search for its origin which in this case, ends with the military regime and challenging this would be at best futile and at worst deadly.

### *Economic mismanagement*

Another element of the collective illusion of contemporary Burma relates to the economy. From a national to a local level, the economy has been poorly managed and, as a result, has a direct impact on children. This is particularly apparent when families decide whether or not they have sufficient resources to send children to school. The following table (Table 2 from Turnell, 2006) records annual GDP growth, according to the Central Statistics Office of Myanmar. However, as Turnell argues, these figures are little more than fiction. The country suffers from hyper inflation; it has no viable banking system (the system that was growing collapsed in

2003); and much of the formal economic activity of the country is controlled by the ruling military elite, as is much of the informal activity that relates to illegal trade in timber and drugs.

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Claimed Annual GDP Growth Rates (% p.a.), 1999-2004

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1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
10.9	13.7	11.3	10.0	10.6	10.0

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Table 4 - Claimed Annual GDP Growth Rates 1994-2004

The UNDP indicators rank Burma as 148 out of 176 countries (Hável and Tutu, 2005). Yet Burmese newspapers and government statistics would have us believe a very different picture, one of prosperity and growth.

Nowhere is the contradiction between truth and reality more palpable than in the many satellite townships of Rangoon and Mandalay. Data collected for this research (both secondary and empirical) looked at the economic activity of poor families in one such township, named Hlaingtharyar, just outside Rangoon. This township has been the centre of much INGO attention over the past 14 years. Two INGOs, Médecins San Frontières (Holland) and World Vision have operated community based programs there since 1992. Initially both focussed on health and HIV. World Vision now has broader based community development initiatives (including micro-finance programs) and AZG has broadened its health focus to include public health approaches to HIV and AIDS. Local groups such as the YWCA and the YMCA also have community development programs in this township along with a number of other groups. In some respects, Hlaingtharyar

has benefited far more than other comparable townships around Rangoon but despite this, poverty indicators show distressing conditions.

Hlaingtharyar has a population of around 200,000 people living in an estimated 35,000 households. There is an industrial zone in the south of the township comprising numerous factories. According to World Vision data approximately 10 – 15% of the population is migratory (Clawson and Keller, 1998). Hlaingtharyar is a resettlement town, first populated by Rangoon residents, whose homes were destroyed by fire in 1986 and then, in 1989, by slum dwellers who were cleared from their home in central Rangoon, following the pro-democracy uprisings. In the same way that universities have been constructed away from the city centre, Hlaingtharyar is across a river, with bridge access controlled by armed guards, ensuring its easy isolation, should there be any sign of civil unrest. Many Hlaingtharyar residents commute to the city each day for work, despite the travel time and cost, which can substantially eat into the meagre earnings of a daily wage earner. Infrastructure in Hlaingtharyar is extremely limited, with few sealed roads, limited access to health and education facilities, lack of drainage and extremely poor communication networks. Flooding in the wet season is a constant problem and easily contained public health problems such as diarrhoea, acute respiratory illness and febrile illness are common, particularly affecting children (Clawson and Keller, 1998). Secondary data collected for this thesis from World Vision project records of 217 households in Ward 12 of Hlaingtharyar elicited the following demographic information:

Household Data Ward 12 Hlaingtharyar Township		
Household Type	Number	Percent

Both parents + children only	150	69.1%
Both parents + children + other relatives	41	18.9%
Single mother and children	14	6.4%
Single father and children	3	1.4%
Single mother and children + other relatives	6	2.8%
Single father and children + other relatives	0	0%
Other	3	1.4%
Total	217	100%

Table 5 - World Vision Myanmar Household Data of Ward 12 Hlaingtharyar Township

There was an average family size of just under six people per household. The ward was predominantly Buddhist and Burman, with only a few representatives from other ethnicities. Common forms of employment and daily income are captured in Table 5. Although this data is some years old now, wage versus cost of living rises have resulted in a depreciation of the value of the income of most residents. In 2003 the consumer prices inflation rate was estimated to be 49.7%, making it the second highest in the world out of 176 countries (Hável and Tutu, 2005). Even though work is available for people in Hlaingtharyar, much is on a daily basis and within a poorly regulated workplace. The following table illustrates the main forms of employment for people in one of the Hlaingtharyar wards:

Common forms of labour				
Type of Work	Family	Men	Women	Children
Selling alcohol	500+			
Tea shop	800			
Vendor (mostly women and children)		200-300	200-300	50-100
Construction worker		200	125	80-100
Government worker		100	100	
Trishaw driver		100-800		
Laundry			50-150	
Painter	400	170-250		180

Factory worker		200	200	
Farm help		100-150	80-100	60(girls) 75(boys)
Ditch digger		150-200	120-150	120

Table 6 - Common Forms of Employment and Daily Income, Ward 12 Hlaingtharyar (extracted from World Vision Myanmar Project Records)

Daily income and low paying jobs mean that children must work. World Vision Myanmar estimated that an average family of three children in Hlaingtharyar required at least 30,000 Kyat a month to meet their basic minimum needs of food and housing (World Vision Myanmar, 1999).

This data was reinforced by figures gathered for school attendance which was considerably lower than UNICEF estimates for the country (as discussed in Chapter Three). World Vision estimates (in Table 6 below) showed the following school attendance in Hlaingtharyar Ward Twelve (Clawson and Keller, 1998).

Age	In School (%)	% that are girls	Out of School (%)	% that are girls
5-7	53	69.8	47	38.3
8-10	30	70	70	38.6
11-13	17	58.8	83	36.1
14-16	16	62.5	84	35.7
17-18	12	75	88	34.1
18+	6	66	94	28.7

Table 7 - Estimation of School Attendance in Hlaingtharyar Ward 12

According to these statistics, nearly half of the children in the community do not even begin school and that by the age of 14, only 12% of children remain enrolled. Perhaps the only encouraging aspect to these data is that there are a comparatively higher number of girls in school than boys. This may be attributable to the earning capacity of boys, as illustrated in Table 5.

Empirical data collected for this research focussed on two groups of children, 8 to 12 year olds and thirteen to eighteen year olds. Research conducted with both groups consisted of participatory activities which aimed to understand children's daily activities and their participation in family and community.

Of the first group (10 to 13 year olds), six had never attended school and were illiterate, two had dropped out from kindergarten (the first school year), one had dropped out during the first standard (the second year of school) and four had remained in school until the third standard (the fourth year of school). One of the respondents noted that, even though she had attended school until the third standard, she could still not even read a word. All children worked around the home to support their family and, despite not being in school, had full and demanding days. Beginning at 3.00 a.m. on alternate days, children would queue for government subsidised food, which most did not enjoy, although some found it a good time for socialising with friends. Adult (parent) respondents from the same community indicated that this was a job that even younger children (seven years old) had to undertake and that the queue could take anywhere up to four hours. Other jobs consisted of cooking the rice for meals, cleaning the house and, predominantly, looking after younger siblings.

Caring for younger siblings was particularly demanding and time consuming and children noted, humorously, that they had developed a number of techniques for doing this:

*When the baby cries, first we 'kyaw de' buy snacks, put the baby into bed and last of all, smack them (10 year old female participant from Hlaingtharyar).*

Apart from these jobs, younger children usually found some time to play outside on the streets. They observed that under the house was too muddy (houses are generally build on raised platforms above the ground, due to constant flooding and poor drainage). Games involved football for the boys and toe-se-toe (a traditional game) for the girls. They noted that video halls were an alternative when they did not want to play. Children calculated that they had about two hours each day when they were able to have their own time. In general, life for younger children in Hlaingtharyar involved a relatively high level of responsibility, particularly in the care of younger siblings. Many youngsters were withdrawn from school in order to allow parents or elder siblings to work, thus playing their role in the economic survival of the family. These children had a negligible role in decision-making in the family, apart from their direct responsibilities, i.e. how to look after and discipline a younger brother or sister.

On the whole parents acknowledged a great deal of love and concern for their children and were eager to see them in school where they could learn and create opportunities for the future. Economic circumstances were cited as the main reason for not being able to do this. Parents delighted in the children and were very inclusive – many accompanied them to focus group discussions and were allowed to sit and listen or play in the background. Some were engaged in discussion around issues as the focus group proceeded. Parents in Hlaingtharyar, unlike some of the middle class and better educated parents interviewed did not relate their (often dire) circumstances to regime policies (or lack of). Survival from

one day to the next was the highest priority and there was little time or energy to think and reflect on why they were in their present situation. Data collection activities with older children (thirteen to seventeen year olds) elicited far more information than their younger counterparts. They spent on average just under three hours a day on household chores. They did not report finding this onerous although most would have liked more time for recreation. All but two who took part in focus group discussions could be considered 'working children', however, for a number, work consisted of training in World Vision community centres for sewing or bicycle repair (during which children were paid for piece work or repairs made while being taught skills). The graph below (Figure 11) provides a number of insights into their daily lives:

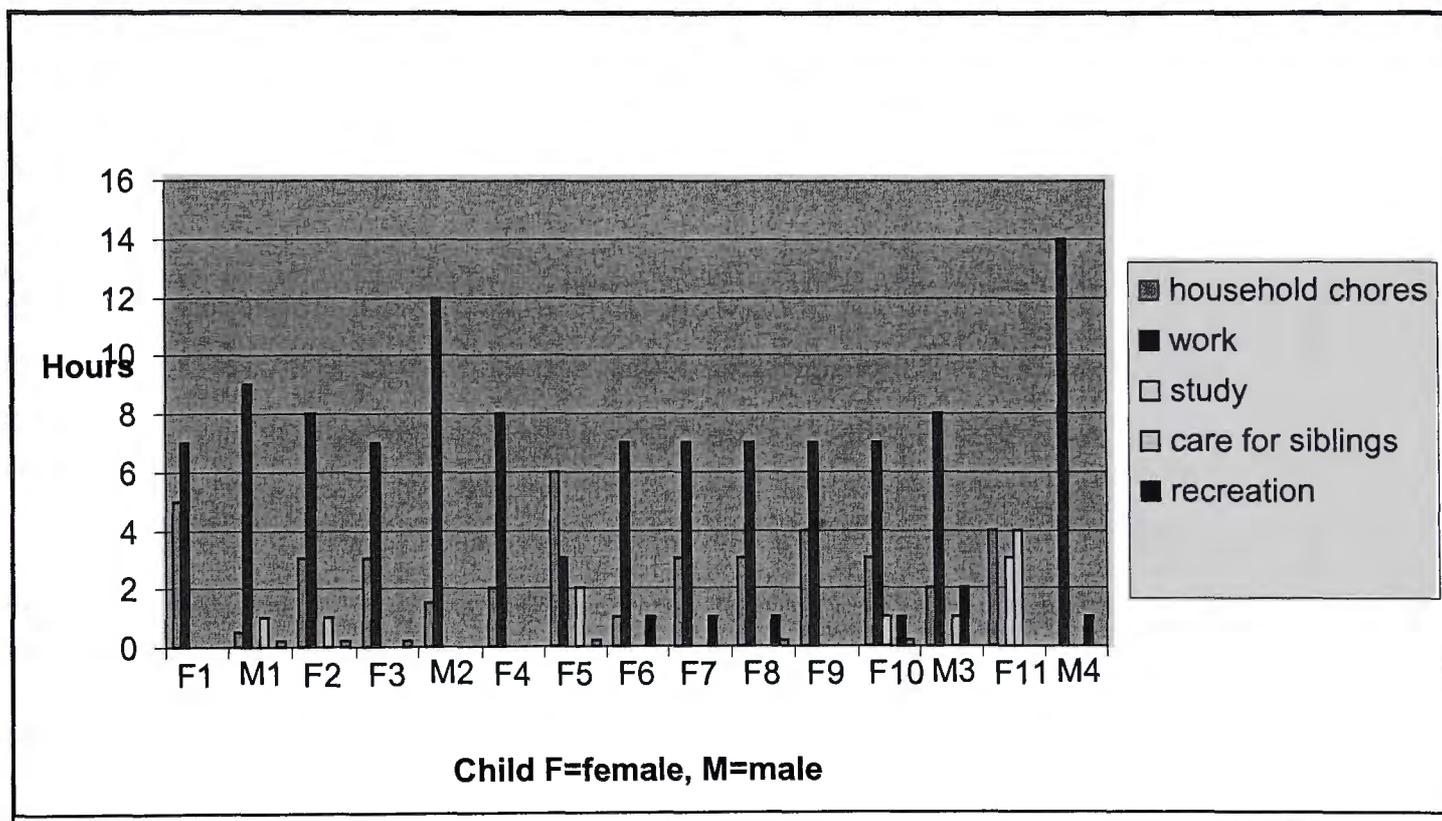


Figure 11 - Activities of Teenage Children in Hlaingtharyar

All children had long days that included a multitude of tasks. Household chores included preparing food, washing dishes, collecting firewood, queuing for oil rations,

looking after animals, cleaning and odd jobs. Girls played a greater role in the home, although boys interviewed tended to work longer hours. M4 worked fourteen hour days, contributing his pay to the family, but did nothing to help with family chores.

Most children played a variety of roles requiring a diverse set of skills including those related to work, to cooking, to caring for younger siblings and elderly relatives. Fewer than half the children had any time for recreation. While only six of the 15 children spent time praying, all said that they thought religious values were important. All children contributed part or whole of their wage to the family.

The majority of children admitted that they would prefer to be at school, although they articulated a certain conflict here, feeling also a strong responsibility to look after their families:

*I am happy to work...I don't want to go to school. If I have a skill, I can support my mother (14 year old boy, Hlaingtharyar).*

*If you don't have education, you don't have dignity. If you can't read, then people will speak badly of you (16 year old girl, Hlaingtharyar).*

*Ah, if I have education, I can just sit and eat! (15 year old boy construction worker, Hlaingtharyar)*

Attitudes of these children are represented in other studies as discussed earlier in this Chapter (for example UNICEF Myanmar, 1996, Ar Thit Consultancy Group, 2002), and they reflect a deep rooted sense of responsibility towards family, along with a certain sense of autonomy and pride in the ability to work and protect or look after their family. Parents of the children (fourteen interviewed as part of the data

collection) felt, on the whole, that education was valuable and would prefer their children to be at school although a number (five) said that they preferred their children to have professional (working) skills, as they would be able to stand on their own feet. All parents agreed that the education system was corrupt and that it relied upon having money to pass exams.

Children's work, as indicated in Table 5, is often in similar professions to their parents, generally for a lower wage than men, though not for women. Work is generally on a casual basis and is dependent on availability and seasonal change, resulting in a child needing

to work in a number of different jobs over the course of a year. Vending and construction work were considered the two most common jobs for children.

<p>Khin Htwe Yi (F 16 yr)          6 am – get up, wash          7 am – cook rice and curry, wash dishes, clean house, wash clothes, fetch water, bath, have breakfast, go to work          9 am – start work          12 – 1 pm – lunch          1 pm – work          5 pm – clean up work place, go home, cook rice, wash dishes, go to market, cook curry          7 pm – have dinner          9.30 – go to bed</p>	<p>Po Thada (M 16 yr)          5.30 am – get up, wash, fold bedding, breakfast          6.30 am – go to work          12 – 1pm – lunch break          1 pm – work          7 pm – close shop, change clothes, returns home          8.30 – arrive home, change, sometimes watch video at video shop then go to bed</p>
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This was reinforced by

World Vision statistical

Figure 12 Examples of Child's Working Day

information about Hlaingtharyar citing that vending accounted for 30% and 50% of child workers in the township (Clawson and Keller, 1998). Children did not consider their household chores to be work despite the fact that it often took up a good deal of time as illustrated in the daily activity outline of Khin Htwe Yi in Figure 13 above. Rather work around the home was seen as familial responsibility.

Focus group discussions with parents indicated an acceptance of the reality of work for children. Although most parents saw the value of education, they were all pragmatic in their acceptance of the economic reality that, if they did not work, they would starve.

A majority of the older children had taken part in community works tasks on a regular basis. The practice of community labour in Burma has been much criticised and in June 2000, the International Labour Organisation voted to invoke Article 33 of the ILO Constitution for the first time in its history, calling on the Regime to take concrete steps towards the elimination of forced labour practices (International Labour Organisation, 14 June 2000). Older children in Hlaingtharyar reported numerous instances of assisting with community work projects, that included road building and ditch digging.

### *The socio-political realm - conclusions*

While it is not possible to generalise these findings, Hlaingtharyar is not unlike other urban townships around Rangoon and Mandalay. In many ways it is better resourced, as a result of the long term INGO interest in the area. It is also a hub for industry and transport and, therefore, has seen the development of factories that provide employment for many. The economic reality for children in Hlaingtharyar enables us to draw certain conclusions about childhood and aspects of participation.

Firstly, children take responsibility from an early age but they often have little choice in this. The need to work is not always dictated by parental demands but

sometimes by economic necessity that children themselves acknowledge and respond to. Children's income is generally given to parents apart from a small amount of pocket money. If children are unable to make money, punishment could ensue. A working child's income could be equal to that of parents and in some cases the working child is the sole bread winner for the family. Working children are seen as an economic necessity and, while not all children within the same family need to work, using scarce resources to send children to school is often seen as too much of a burden and parents would rather that their children to be fed than be in school. The tendency towards sending children to work is reinforced by the lack of trust in the government schooling system. Education, therefore, is not always seen as a viable, option although children and adults alike see its benefit.

Children are included in community work tasks, such as road and ditch digging and, in this way, are seen as on a par with adults. Children's lower status in the family makes it more likely for them to be nominated as the family conscript for community work. Some children felt proud to be able to contribute to the community through these jobs, while others did the minimum of what was required. In terms of paid work, the value of children and women's work was more or less the same.

Women are usually seen as being responsible for the family, including making sure that children go off to work each day and ensuring that they have something to eat when they return. Fathers interviewed were not nearly as active in getting their children out to work, *I don't force them to work, they do it on their own...*said one father from Hlaingtharyar.

## *The personal realm*

Another aspect to be taken into account, when considering the factors that affect the way in which children participate within a family and a community, are those factors relating to the child's own 'agency'. Agency can be expressed in an overt sense through children's own ability to make decisions and act upon them. It can also be expressed in a more subliminal sense through 'representational' contributions that children make. That is through what they contribute ontologically to the family and community, by virtue of the fact that they are children.

Predominant themes arose in the course of data collection, including the responsibility children take either by choice or circumstance, contributions children make and the reason for this, the social capital that children build up amongst peers as well as adult community members and the types of decisions children make and the underlying reasons. Each of these themes will be discussed below, to develop a more complete understanding of the way in which a child's agency impacts upon their opportunity for participation within Burmese society.

### *Taking responsibility*

*I take care of my family because my brothers are overseas and I have to look after grandmother and father (who is an alcoholic). Mother has to work so I have to do it all myself. At first I hated my brothers because they were not there to help. Now it is not so bad. Taking responsibility makes me emotionally stronger. (May Lay, 17 year old female respondent)*

The comment above, made by a girl from a relatively privileged family in Rangoon is echoed by many of her peers in poor urban slums (and even those from rural

areas) interviewed as a part of this study. Children tend to have a great sense of responsibility, no matter what their economic or social status. Responsibility is shown, both through children 'doing things', that support the family and through the way in which they adhere to familial and societal expectations.

The young people interviewed in the wealthy urban demographic made a significant contribution to the life of their families. For example, while obviously in the upper age range of 'childhood' (as defined by the CRC), May Lay had, at least for the time being, given up the opportunity to travel overseas to study in order to look after the family. Caring for a family in Rangoon requires a high degree of initiative and innovation. As May Lay described, this role consisted of caring for grandparents, doing the household chores and looking after the running of the house. In Burma this is not a simple task, requiring dealing with the local authorities, contracting trades people, paying bills (no easy task at times in Burma), managing staff (a maid or gardener for example) and much more.

Young people had mixed feelings about too much responsibility but ultimately felt it important, not only for what they could do for others but for what it meant for their own development:

*Taking responsibility is very important as it makes us more mature.  
But sometimes we feel frustrated (Thidar)*

There is often little choice but to contribute; as power based hierarchies within Burmese familial traditions require children to respect the wishes of parents and care for their parents and grandparents. Nilar, the only child that remains at home out of three siblings, said that she takes all the responsibility for her parents. Thidar

said that she is so used to living up to parental expectations that sometimes she feels like 'messing up' just to see what would happen.

Some children are more assertive of their own ambitions as is illustrated in the story (Figure 14 below) from Tin Ma Myint, an eleven year old girl who arrived at the

World Vision drop-in-centre from

Mandalay with her younger four

year old brother. She had been

registered at the centre in

Mandalay prior to her journey

south so knew of the work of

World Vision and had the

wherewithal to find the Rangoon

centre. While such

independence and self-will

would be seen as

uncharacteristic of Burmese

children, it is by no means

unusual and was a common

aspect of all groups of children

involved in this study. Her story

illustrates a number of salient points. Firstly, the responsibilities that she is required

by her parents to take might, by some standards, seem beyond the capabilities of

an eleven year old girl: working from the age of five and caring for siblings and a

household. The choice she makes to escape from this situation and the fact that

she takes her three year old brother with her is, if anything, more astounding.

*I lived in a makeshift house in Mandalay with my parents and three siblings. Before I was 5 I had to sell ice water. One day, my sister was hit by a car. I was beaten because of this. Three months after the accident I climbed up to the top of Mandalay hill and fell from a ladder. I spent 20 days in the hospital. My brother got a fever and my mother had no money so I had to go and beg when I was young. My mother was sick too but my father was well and did not do any work. He made me go out and beg. I went to school until 3<sup>rd</sup> standard but failed my exam so I dropped out. In the house I have 6 siblings and I had to cook, wash and beg in the daytime. Sometimes I went to the pagoda to sell flowers and mangoes. I love my father but not my mother because she beats me. I came to Rangoon (but did not tell my parents) because I did not like to beg. My grandmother lives in Rangoon but I cannot remember where. I brought my little brother with me because I don't like him to beg either. The guard let us jump the train in Mandalay. He asked us why we were going to Rangoon and took pity on us. When the conductor came he asked what we would do in Rangoon. I told him that we would work. He said that they could only look after us until we arrived in Rangoon. When we arrived we found the LPK centre. If I go back home I want to take some money and a present for my family.*

Figure 13 - Tin Ma Myint's story of her trip from Mandalay to Rangoon

Whether or not children should be put in the position of having to make such decisions is one thing but that an eleven year old can negotiate free passage on a train, travel almost 1000 kilometres and find her way to a safe haven illustrates considerable ingenuity and courage. Similar sentiments are detailed in the brief life line drawn by Maung Htein Lin, a 12 year old boy at the World Vision Myanmar drop-in-centre:



*"When I was young I lived with my mother. In the end she dies. When I was ten my sister asked me to sell watermelon. When I was 12 I left home. At the end, when I got on to the street, I got to the Youth Training Centre. After that I ran away. After that I arrived at the World Vision Centre. Now I have become a good boy. Now I am attending school. I am in second standard. When I am older I want to do a singer or the leader of a band. If there are many mistakes, please forgive me." ((Maung Htein Lin, 12 year old male respondent).*

Taking responsibility is a vital aspect of participation. In a variety of ways as illustrated above, many Burmese children either take or have responsibility thrust upon them. What was not as clear through data was the reciprocal nature of this, i.e. the manner in which adults allowed children who took responsibility greater freedom and opportunity to take part in decision-making processes in the home.

### *Contributing*

Popular (western) understandings of childhood encourage the belief that children, particularly teenagers, are so overwhelmed with hormonal change and a fascination with the self that notions of contributing for a greater good are most unlikely (see for

example, Parry, 2005). Yet all groups of children taking part in this study expressed great pride in being able to contribute to their families, to their communities and, in the case of street children living away from home that were consulted, to the centre in which they were living.

For the novices at Thoun Htat Kyaung, the feeling of contributing was not something that originated simply from their belonging to the monastery. Most of the novices noted that from a very young age (some as young as three years old), that they were required to work on the farm or sell merchandise to contribute to the family economy. Maung Soe Oo, for example, recalls working in the fields with his mother from the age of four and Saing Kham Lu doing the same from six years of age (see Picture 9). All of the novices noted that their family life involved helping in some kind of work from a very young age, often taking responsibility for siblings. The novices felt happy that they could do this; proud to be able to contribute to the family. This was common in Hlaingtharyar as well, with all but one child acknowledging their time spent in contributing to family chores, as outlined in the graph in Figure 10. Children who had experienced a rural upbringing were particularly aware of the need to contribute to the family. Tin Myo (picture 6 below), a 12 year old boy who eventually ended up at the World Vision Myanmar Street Children's centre related his story:

*My father didn't do anything much, he was a drunkard. My mother worked on a paddy farm. I used to help my mother in the paddy fields. One day my mother became sick and so she stopped working so when I was 10 I had to keep working to buy medicines for her. I got a job with a farmer looking after his cows for 7000kyat a month and 5 pyi of rice. He also gave me food and accommodation to work for him. I had responsibility for 32 cows. I had to take them out to the fields every morning after breakfast. At 11am I would bring them back. I would have to cut grass up and make feed for the cows and feed them. After that I would have my own lunch at about midday then I would take them out to the fields again until 4pm when I would bring them back and put them in their pens...I was the youngest worker on the farm (10 years old). I gave*



Picture 10 Tin Myo in the Drop-in-Centre

*my first salary to my mother. During the second month, a woman who worked on the farm came to tell me that my mother had died...After that the owner of the farm let me bring my little sister (two years younger) to live with me on the farm. I took her out to look after the cows too. Now she is living with my aunt in the village.*

Tin Myo's life bears similarities to many of his peers. Leaving school early to work for the family, as observed previously, is the reality for a large number of children in Burma. The early independence and

responsibility of Tin Myo's life – watching cattle, dealing with employers, caring for his sick mother, is not uncommon. The way in which Tin Myo became carer for a younger sibling is unusual, although not exceptional in Burma. Eventually, once his

aunt was caring for his sister, Tin Myo travelled with his father to Mandalay to find work. Tin Myo's father deserted him in Mandalay at the train station. The boy took up with other children living around the station, eventually finding his way to the World Vision Myanmar street children's centre. Like many of the children who found their way to this shelter, Tin Myo had finally exhausted his social safety nets and networks. When I spoke to Tin Myo he was recovering from being hit by a train. After a month in hospital and losing an arm, most of his other hand and one foot, he was bouncing around with irrepressible energy. It is hard to be totally objective about a lived experience such as this. Life is indeed harsh for many young children in Burma.

Children in Hlaingtharyar, as illustrated in the previous section, were all active and, in some cases, were the primary economic contributors to their families. Children's contributions were not just observed in families from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Children from middle class families all noted significant input into the family, in terms of caring for siblings and/or grandparents and in managing the household.

Children also contributed in a representational sense. Buddhist children, particularly boys, played an important role in gaining merit for their parents when they become novices and monks. Nwe Lwin Htwe, quoted previously, was keen for her two daughters to become nuns. Through participating in religious customs and by achieving in school, children contribute greatly to their parents' and community's sense of place in the world.

There can be a fine line between a reasonable contribution that benefits the child and the family, and exploitation. Certainly, most of the street children who took part in this research reported a degree of exploitation by their parents:

*When I was about 5 I went to school (up to the 5<sup>th</sup> standard) but I had a lot of difficulty. I had no books, no slippers, only three exercise books a year. In the morning I had to sell things at the market then prepare things for school. Sometimes I had no lunch to take with me. From the time I was young, my father took another wife and would not give us any money but gave us a lot of trouble. The two families lived together in a big house, my grandmother's house, but father did not look after the house. When mother was not around, he would beat me and mother would not do anything to help me. I don't know why I can't understand. Then there were four children, now there are eight. My father taught me how to come to the market and collect fish and vegetables which I did while he was selling beetle. One day I was too tired and fell asleep and all the vegetables I had were stolen. He beat me and mother did not do anything. She just took sides with my father. (Aye Myat Thu, 15 year old girl living at World Vision Myanmar Street Children's Program).*

There were other stories children told about spending day after day picking up old cans and bottles for recycling to make money for the family, only to see their parents (usually fathers) buy alcohol and to drink it away. On the whole, however, even the more disadvantaged street children intimated that they were proud to be able to support their families; both through economic as well as 'in kind' contributions, as illustrated in the sentiment expressed by Aye Aye, a 14 year old girl from Hlaingtharyar:

*I would like to do another job like my mother who sells old clothes. I would like to learn and work with my mother.*

## *Decision-making*

The opportunity to make decisions is indicative of a recognised ability and a social space in which one's perspective is valued. The greater the opportunity for children to be involved in making decisions around issues that affect them, the more meaningful their participation is likely to be. The kinds of decisions children are encouraged and able to make, therefore, give particular insight into cultural and socio-political boundaries of participation.

Data was collected from both adults and children about the types of decisions that children should and should not be able to make and at what age. It suggested that while there was a perception about what was appropriate that the reality was often quite different. Thiha (32 year old father of a ten year old daughter) noted the importance of children deciding upon their own religious convictions (being a Christian he referred here to baptism) around the age of 16 and that from middle school (approximately 12 to 14 years old) children should be making their own choices about educational directions. The age at which children should be able to enter sexual relationships, arguably one of the defining differences between childhood and adulthood, he suggested was between 16 and 18 years old, although he noted that often younger children (13 to 14 years) became sexually active within contemporary Burmese society<sup>33</sup>.

During a focus group discussion, staff from the World Vision Myanmar street children's program were asked about societal expectations of children (not only of the street children in their program but children in general) and the decisions they

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<sup>33</sup> Which he noted might have a direct impact on their future through unwanted pregnancies and associated complications.

should and should not be able to make. At a 'functional' level staff suggested that children were given considerable responsibility over decisions relating to day to day activities, such as the types of chores they might do around the house, the clothes they wore and, depending on availability, what they ate. While it was acknowledged that most parents would probably want their children to attend school it was felt that the economic situation meant that children would often have to work to supplement the family income (concurring with the view expressed by parents in Hlaingtharyar, discussed previously in the chapter). World Vision Myanmar staff felt that children often took part in deciding the type of work and even in assessing whether or not they should work or not. They also felt that under the age of 15, children were not generally able to decide whether or not they should enter a relationship with a boy/girl friend. However, one participant mentioned the fact that in her neighbourhood there was a couple who were only 14 years old and their parents had agreed to their marriage.

Focus groups with children elicited further insights. Thirteen to 17 year olds in Hlaingtharyar thought that they should be able to have choice regarding their education:

*We want to choose what we are interested to learn and whether we should study or not.*

This group were very clear in defining how their path into adulthood might be expressed:

*We should be able to decide about boyfriends or girlfriends between the ages of fifteen and twenty... After 10th standard we should be able to decide upon our own career...We should be able to marry when we are over twenty (although some thought that should happen before then)...We want to decide about our own ambitions...*

Certainly, when given the opportunity, children and young people were very clear in expressing their thoughts and desires. However, the small sample of young people interviewed, and the fact that most of those were involved in some way with a child-rights focussed NGO, would suggest that their experience might not be representative of children in general. As Mae Ohn, a senior staff member from Save the Children recalled:

*I think the adults they do not want their children to speak out. The moment you get to school you are told to listen to your teacher and the moment you understand to interact with your parents you are told to listen to them. So that is the culture and it is very difficult to overcome all this. Because Karl you know what I found out for example now sometimes when they invite me I go to the YWCA or the YMCA to give lectures and what happens is that when I talk to the audience and if I open the floor up, they are so happy, it is such a big chance to them to have these kinds of discussions. Whenever I open the floor they are so happy because it is something they want. But what people are not aware of, people who are giving lectures, that this is new, we should encourage. And even though they are kids, I had some interaction with some youth from the YMCA. They were, some of the questions were out of the context but then I even entertained them because I wanted them to use their initiative that's why I encouraged them to ask questions, just to encourage them. So I would say that participation, it might become very popular*

However, according to the focus group discussion with the children who attended university, culturally established patterns about the way in which children should be treated, such as those Mae Ohn refers to above, are being eroded. As Nilar explained, her parents have allowed her to make even some of the most important decisions in her life:

*The only thing my parents decided about was the medical school but once they saw this wasn't the right thing for me, they were happy for me to drop out (Nilar)*

Zaw Win felt that on the whole children were only able to make minor decisions and noted that increasing affluence in some parts of the community is leading to children being pampered and indulged. Thidar said that this was most obvious within the growing private school sector in Rangoon, where she said, the children are from families of the '*nouveau riche*' and that this has resulted in children becoming increasingly rude, breaking down existing cultural norms of deference towards teachers, "*...it's trendy to be rude.*"

May Lay saw this breakdown encroaching on family life as well, observing that children can smoke and drink at any age and that often parents have modelled the treatment of their children upon American movies which often show extreme behaviour, in the belief that this is how children are brought up in the 'outside world'.

There are no universal trends that appear from these data, rather the implication that there are numerous factors influencing decision-making, in different ways, in different socio-economic groups. Perhaps the only common element within the data is that life is changing for children in Rangoon, either as a result of the increasing affluence of a small number of families or the increasing poverty of others. Both trends are influencing the way in which children are treated, the amount of responsibility they have to bear and the decisions that they have to make.

### *The personal realm - conclusions*

Children from each of the study groups showed a very independent and often mature attitude to the choices and decisions that they made. Many displayed a great deal of responsibility, to the extent, in some cases, of becoming sole providers for the family. While there was not always an element of choice, these factors would suggest that children and teenagers can and do make conscious decisions that contribute to the greater good of those around them. This is an important element of participation, albeit often a subconscious one, and might suggest that our expectations of children, for example the rebelliousness of teenage years, are to an extent, socially constructed in the West.

There were a number of correlations that appeared in the data, most significantly the one that existed between the education level of the family and the extent to which children's perspectives are taken into account. All children from the wealthy demographic played significant roles within the family and were able to make major decisions relating to their own life choices, as well as decisions that would have a direct impact on the family. In a similar way, children from poor socio-economic status appeared to have increasing influence within the family, roughly commensurate with their economic productivity. Once children moved beyond the stage of dependency of early childhood, age did not appear to be a significant marker between childhood and adulthood, although deference to age, social status and religious authority was maintained no matter what age.

Personal observations suggested that the political and economic trends within the country have only seemed to worsen, despite momentary periods of optimism. The following insight leads one to question how people survive:

*According to calculations based on the 1997 and 2001 government household surveys, the proportion of people living under the poverty line increased from 23 per cent to 32 per cent over this period. A UN survey from 2005 set the number at 'more than 30 per cent' in the country as a whole, but much higher in Chin state (70 per cent) and Eastern Shan state (52 per cent). It further indicated that, everything else equal, an increase of just 15-20 per cent in food prices would push 'well over 50 per cent' of the total population below the poverty line...(International Crisis Group, 2006 p 2)*

Young people had the ability to be extremely reflective about the impact of the military regime over their own personal predicaments, as is clearly illustrated by Zaw Win below:

*Isolation brought about by the government makes us value things more, both physical things as well as humanity. It makes people more united because of the isolation. Having responsibility makes you mature (Zaw Win).*

Zaw Win has at least in part answered the question of how people have survived. The Burmese have, to varying degrees, been united behind the common cause of anti-regime sentiment. Sometimes this is overtly stated, such as when individuals throw their support behind the National League for Democracy<sup>34</sup> (NLD), but more often, there is an unconscious acceptance that the regime, at least at this point in time, holds absolute power. This has led to the development of a variety of formal

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<sup>34</sup> The NLD maintains offices throughout the country that, over the past 10 years, have been either open or closed depending on regime sentiment. Direct association with the NLD results in military surveillance and holds a significant risk.

and informal social and economic networks, through which survival becomes possible. The growth of civil society referred to in the previous section, is illustrative of this fact. Young people have contributed substantially to the social capital of Burmese society and, by inference, are active participants. Despite this, however, the various illusions discussed previously are, for many, the thin guise under which a semblance of normality is maintained.

## *Overall conclusions*

### *Difficulties with existing rights-based models of participation*

Hierarchical models for participation (e.g. Hart's Ladder) become problematic, insofar as they fail to take account of the true extent of children's social, economic and cultural participation and insist on a rights based paradigm as the standard against which all participation must be measured. The focus on decision-making, so highly regarded in rights-based discourse, and strongly reinforced in the CRC, is not necessarily the only way in which children consent to participate, or not. A framework for participation must, therefore, take into account the fact that children's decisions are not always verbally articulated.

An associated difficulty with existing hierarchical models of participation is that many are situated within the context of a specific development project. In that regard, such models can be useful tools for helping organisations identify how they may be more inclusive of children in decision-making, within any particular activity. However, children's lives do not simply exist in the context of a project or program. Many children interviewed as a part of this research were involved in projects operated by NGOs in Burma. However, they also had other identities as, for example, members of a family, a community, or a workplace and in each of these

contexts there were factors that inhibited or promoted their participation. It was obvious from data collected that, in a number of instances, individual children had great influence over economic, as well as other social decision-making, in the family context.

#### *Asian values and rights-based participation*

Findings illustrated some of the conflict in the human rights and Asian Values debate. Jacobsen and Brun (2000) identify four arguments used by advocates for Asian Values to refute the idea of legitimacy of universal human rights. Firstly they suggest there is a cultural argument that human rights emanates from particular historical, social, economic, cultural and political conditions. Secondly they identify a reflexive, collective argument that Asian societies differ from Western by being communitarian in spirit, putting family and community above the needs of the individual. Thirdly, they suggest there is a disciplinary argument, that Asian cultures are more disciplined in their social, economic and political life, leading to the idea that social and economic rights take precedence over civil and political rights, i.e. a conflict in prioritisation over first and second generation rights. Finally, they suggest that there is an organic argument that sees state and society as one, in the Asian context with a mandate to rule for the common good of all.

The present findings suggested that children often made decisions based on the needs of their family rather than on their own needs. At a certain level this might be seen to concur with proponents of Asian Values. However, drawing such conclusions could be overly simplistic. That children made decisions for the good of their family, sometimes at great personal expense, does not automatically imply that they did not at the same time see that their own rights as individuals were any

less important. Buddhism is an underlying framework upon which much of Burmese social and cultural values have been built. U Nayaka suggested that there are many principles within Buddhist teaching that reflect both a sense of individual rights, as well as the communal rights espoused by Asian values advocates. Within his school he has tried to create an atmosphere in which the individual is respected and encourages their individuality (free thought) but not at the expense of the common good. This illustrates that the notions of individual rights and Asian values are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This issue will be discussed in greater detail on the following pages.

#### *Socio-economic status and participation*

In a number of the families interviewed children were frequently consulted about major decisions. This appeared to be more representative of the middle class, however, such as in Nwe Lwin Htwe's family, implying that education and children's space and ability to participate might be closely connected. Children from poor socio-economic backgrounds did not, on the whole, appear to have a great deal of choice about their lives and the manner in which they contributed to the family. For example, they could not choose to go to school if the family could not afford it. Education, which was often very closely linked with economic status, may be a key variable to the potential of children to participate in a decision-making capacity. The education of adults with which the child had immediate contact (family members and teachers in particular) had a direct influence in shaping an environment in which children's participation could be acknowledged and developed. Children from families with a lower socio-economic status, although they did not often have an influence in decision-making processes, did participate within the family. Their contributions through work (paid and unpaid), care for

siblings or elderly relatives, and contributions to community work tasks, gave them a certain status within the family, even though this did not often result in influence over decision-making processes. Children were proud to be able to contribute to their family survival and well-being in this way. In addition, the harsh economic circumstances denied all family members decision-making capacity, insofar as their main choices each day related primarily to how food was to be put on the table that night.

### Gender and participation

There was no doubt that gender had an impact on the way in which children were treated. It was more common for girls to be left at home to watch over younger siblings, and to be withdrawn from school more readily than boys. Girls took more responsibility for the running of the family, although boys were often expected to bring in some kind of income. In terms of decision-making in the home, there did not seem to be a significant difference between boys and girls, although there was definitely an expectation that girls should be more responsible.

### The power of the narrative

Due to Burma's isolation, there have been remarkably few external influences on the way in which people bring up their children. This is particularly so in the poorer socio-economic areas of Rangoon. It has only been in recent years, following the 'economic liberalisation' of the 1990s, that communities have had access to foreign media and entertainment on any scale. Such influences, along with the increasing presence of international NGOs, have introduced new thoughts about childhood. Hlaingtharyar, the community in which a number of interviews took place, is one area in which the impact of concepts about child rights on both adults and children was obvious. Rights had been discussed at a conceptual level and some adults

had changed their disciplinary practices as a result of the CRC. One parent noted how learning about the CRC meant that he no longer had to hit his children in order to discipline them!

Urban middle class families have, since the beginning of economic liberalisation, been gradually introduced to foreign ideas, both Western and from other Asian countries. The most popular television program in Burma at the present time is a Korean “soapie”. Still, these have only a minor impact on the way in which Burmese view life. The predominant influences are traditional, stemming from Buddhism and cultural heritage. This narrative is being affected from within, however, as a result of the increasing pressure of poor governance and the resultant harsh economic environment. Where childhood was once seen as a carefree time, with few constraints, poverty is driving children into the workplace, often open to exploitation and abuse.

### *Living in multiple realities*

Poor governance has led to an increasing number of ‘realities’ for children. There is polarisation between the few with access to resources and the majority with access to very little. Adults interviewed, who were children during the Ne Win socialist era in Burma, now look back on those days with fond memories of everyone being poor together but never wanting for anything. The situation now is very different, with poor children being expected more frequently to take on what were once considered ‘adult’ roles, in some instances becoming the sole bread winner in families. In families that cannot cope, this often results in children being forced on to the street or into monasteries or orphanages where they will, at least, be fed. Others fall for the lure of the border and travel to Thailand in search of

work. It is a decreasing minority that are able to remain in school and go on to study at university. The reality for them, however, is little better. With large classes, rote learning and a corrupt education system, even the wealthy find little satisfaction.

### *Is Buddhism an alternative to rights?*

One aspect of Burmese culture that seems to have changed little since the current regime has been in power is the overwhelming presence of Buddhism, despite what has been an obvious push by the regime to influence the sangha. Clearly this informs people's understandings of childhood and constitutes certain rules and cultural norms about how children should be treated and how they should treat adults who exert some kind of authority over them. There are different interpretations of Buddhist teaching as with any religious doctrine. However, the idea of respect and honour for children is very strong. Many people try to live their lives according to Buddhist teaching, and for this reason it is highly influential in the social construction of Burmese childhood. Buddhist teaching has a very clearly articulated code of understanding about mutual rights and responsibilities between children and significant adults such as parents and teachers. Although different to the CRC, particularly from a legal perspective, this includes discussion of rights and responsibility and has the fundamental freedom of the individual at its centre; as U Nayaka so aptly described, the simplicity of Buddhist teaching as "*free thought*". In addition, Buddhism would suggest that even very young children can be considered to be fully matured. Returning to the fundamental philosophical dilemma of the thesis, one is forced not simply to ask whether or not this Buddhist discourse is more valid than others (the CRC for example) but rather to make the point that

Buddhist discourse should be listened to and understood and taken into account in the course of any “development “ initiative in Burma.

This chapter has demonstrated that in order to understand notions of participation in the current political and economic climate of Burma, current hierarchical models of participation are often inadequate. A more nuanced approach that identifies different realms in which children participate is more reflective of the complexities of daily life faced by children in contemporary society. Data collected suggests that three realms should be taken into account. Firstly, the narrative realm which considers the way in which childhood is conceptualised within the Burmese psyche. This develops from historical and cultural antecedents and has a strong influence over the way in which society identifies appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and treatment of children and even in the way in which children and childhood are defined and articulated in every day life. These factors are further complicated by the second realm, the socio-political realm. This acknowledges the broader contemporary contextual factors that influence the way in which children are treated within society. Data suggests that factors such as education and the increasingly harsh economic circumstances faced by many are placing increasing pressure upon children to fulfil what were once seen as adult responsibilities. Finally, there is an urgent need for children’s perspectives to be taken into greater account in defining how they perceive their own lives and define their own participation. Children’s decisions to undertake roles within the family and community that may seem contrary to having their rights realised (such as children choosing to work rather than pursue and education) need greater acknowledgement and understanding. The following chapter will, therefore, identify how three different

organisations deal with issues of children's participation and will build on emerging themes from the present chapter. Together, they will contribute to the presentation of a new framework for which children's participation might be understood, presented in chapter six.