Migrant Youth and Children of Migrants in a Globalized World:
Position Paper

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My brief, as set out in the invitation letter to the workshop dated October 5, 2007, is to outline “future directions and possibilities for developing a child-centric perspective of migration”. This is a welcome invitation. For anyone working in the field of child migration, the dearth of reliable information, of comprehensive and cross national statistical data, of common indicators and definitional categories is a matter of concern. Redressing this research deficit would be a significant achievement.

The first challenge is to identify the desired scope of the proposed research initiative. The papers submitted discuss a broad spectrum of variables – geographical focus, age boundaries, scope of impact of migration, nature of migration. The choice of framework is of course going to be somewhat arbitrary, but it should, in my view, be driven by some agreed set of goals, which are broader than the simple desire to increase knowledge about children and migration.

One goal could be to try and maximize the collection of data which will have relevance for key social problems confronting migrant children and the states that they live in: lack of legal status; exclusion from adequate educational, health, welfare provision; low labour force success; social and affective marginalization. What type of research would assist? Quantitative and qualitative studies, both national but also regional and even local: one would want to document both the legal, economic, social, geographic indicators of marginalization and exclusion, but also the psychosocial correlates. How many undocumented children are there in developed states, how many stateless children, how many children with undocumented parents?

Another goal could be to try and get at the voice of the child – child-centric as in child produced data. There is some work which tries to do this – using children as interviewers, using long interviews with migrant children and youth as a window onto various aspects of their lives (e.g. a wonderful collection by Marine Vassort, *Paroles d’Errance* with 5 long first person narratives by Albanian, Moldovan, Moroccan, Romanian and Palestinian undocumented street children in Europe). But much more could be done to document the impact of migration – from the initial decision making process, to the journey, to the vicissitudes of integration post arrival – on children from different backgrounds. Creative and innovative strategies will have to be explored, outside the usual research models. Research ethics questions will have to be addressed raising new issues and problems.

A third goal could be to address the most dangerous migration routes – trafficking, smuggling, exploitative labour, sex work – and the tension between recognizing children’s agency and acknowledging their vulnerability. Is international law right in establishing that any child moved across a border for “exploitation” is by definition a

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1 Editions P’tits Papiers, Marseilles Nov 2006
trafficking victim, even if the child consented or initiated the process? Does this categorization assist affected children in meaningful ways? Or does it lay them open to “rescue” operations which return them against their will (and even their best interests) to the country of origin, and/or “secure shelters” which effectively imprison to protect? While these are developed world questions, children involved in south south migration face comparable issues: former child soldiers from Sierra Leone and Liberia, following the end of DDR programs, are moving towards other sources of income with potentially devastating consequences for their future and the security of the destination state. But combat is one of the only games in town, and a means of securing patronage and protection in the absence of other structures, a rational choice. These issues raise the broader question of what forms of child labour are acceptable and what policies should be adopted to support whatever decision is taken about this.

The second challenge in developing a comprehensive research agenda on children and migration is to draw into the process experts with the requisite skills and interests. It is widely acknowledged that the two most relevant bodies of research – child and adolescent development and migration and economic development – have generally been adjacent rather than overlapping. But this is beginning to change. There are developmental psychologists, therapists and trauma experts, child rights advocates and groups working with undocumented and irregular populations who focus on migrant children, though mainly on asylum seekers or refugees (some NGOs such as the Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture or the Tavistock Institute in London; Save the Children, the Separated Children in Europe Project, GISTI in France, PICUM in Brussels, several organizations in Australia including those that contributed to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commissioner’s report on detention of migrant children; groups such as CLINIC, The National Center for Immigrant and Refugee Children in the US); there are also research teams attached to hospitals and clinics that have carried out some small scale research projects (Kings College Hospital in London; Boston Medical Research Center). And some research institutes with a focus on migration studies are developing specialist interests in children (ISIM at Georgetown, University of Hastings Law School Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, The Urban Institute2. Some migration scholars in law, sociology, anthropology and political science departments are also undertaking research on child migrants or children in migrant communities (Marrow3; Cebulko4, Thronson5). These constituencies could provide valuable additional inputs into framing an interdisciplinary research agenda on children and migration.

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3 Helen Marrow, *Immigrant Bureaucratic Incorporation: The Dual Roles of State Policies and Professional Missions* (Unpublished manuscript on file with the author).
4 Kara Cebulko, *Documented, Undocumented and Somewhere “in-Between”: The Effects of Documentation Status on Children of Brazilian Immigrants*, unpublished manuscript on file with the author.
5 David Thronson, “Kids will be Kids? Reconsidering Conceptions of Children’s Rights underlying Immigration Law”, 63 Ohio St. L.J. 979.
Finally, as I point out in my comments on the background papers, many definitional questions which dominate the study of international migration in general and child migration in particular need more careful analysis and investigation, to avoid false dichotomies and contrived results. The distinction between voluntary and forced migration is highly problematic and skews state responses to migrants in many unsatisfactory ways; research programs should avoid the simplistic, even inaccurate assumptions underlying this approach. Similarly, the categorization of migration as temporary or permanent, long term or short term, is unsatisfactory: cyclical migration, changing intentions, the indeterminacy of economic and political factors, all impinge of the intentions of migrants and the realities of migration, and it is probably more helpful to deconstruct this simple division than to reproduce it. The vexed division between economic and “real” or political or Convention refugees is also increasingly problematic. For the purposes of this discussion, refugees should not be excluded from the research frame simpliciter, because many of the issues they confront, particularly as undocumented or illegal migrants, are indistinguishable from those that are of concern here. In short, I hope that a future ambitious research initiative on children and migration will not reproduce some of the most limiting classifications that have dominated the field for the previous decades, but rather open up the analytic framework so that the complexity and dynamism of the phenomena are captured.