Future directions and possibilities for developing a child-centric perspective on migration. Position paper by Kathleen Newland

A certain number of fundamental decisions must be made about the parameters of this ambitious task, and the choices are not obvious. Although the dichotomies within migration are often portrayed too starkly (temporary vs. permanent, illegal vs. legal, etc.), some lines must be drawn for the sake of both manageability and clarity. These include:

- **Age categories.** Will the child–centric perspective include children and youth, or children only? My inclination would be to stick to children (probably 14 or under), because the issues involving youth elide so easily into the issues of adult migration, particularly around questions of agency. While it is certainly true that some children aged 10-14 or so will make independent decisions about migration, they are more likely than older children to conform to the decisions of their parents or other adult decision-makers in their lives.

- **Internal or international migration.** The impact on children of internal and international migration may be similar (even internal migration in some countries involves changes in language and culture), the policy framework for international engagement with questions of child welfare are different when children cross an international border, particularly in cases of forced migration. More than one government, as well as international organizations, will have mandates in cases of international migration. Data sources will also differ, as ill legal frameworks for intervention. I would favor a focus on international migration, with ample reference to analogous impacts of internal migration when it is useful.

- **Child migrants, children of migrants, or children affected by migration.** The universe of “children affected by migration” is huge, encompassing native-born, non-migrants who live in areas heavily affected by immigration or emigration as well as the other two categories. Child migrants and children of migrants are distinct though overlapping populations. Any of these are legitimate choices for defining the inquiry, though I would recommend not defining the area of inquiry as “children affected by migration”, on grounds of manageability and the possibility of drawing boundaries. It is more difficult to justify excluding either of the other two categories, so I would suggest including both.

- **Geographic coverage.** The inclusion of South-south migration is compelling, both because it is so common and because so little is known about the precise dimensions and characteristics of South-South migration in general, and of children in particular. It also
seems that South-South migration of children involves some of (though by no means all) of the worst kinds of exploitation and abuse of child migrants, such as children who work as miners, fisher folk, domestic servants, sex workers, and camel jockeys.

The South-North migration of children should, of course, include North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand as well as Europe. It is probably reasonable to exclude most instances of North-North migration of children, although the work should be alert to instances where child migration in this sphere is problematic.

Problems of data collection, availability and desegregation are obviously major constraints on research and policy formulation. The concept paper of Tienda, Taylor and Maughan is wise, I think, in suggesting that the proposed program focus on including questions about child migrants and migration in existing data collection efforts, including major survey projects. The World Bank’s study of migration in and from Africa is mentioned in the concept paper, but it is at quite an advanced stage in fashioning the survey instrument. No time is to be lost in making representations about including questions about children. (Full disclosure: the author of this position note is a member of the advisory committee for the Bank project.)

Other ongoing data collection projects are not mentioned, and should perhaps be approached in the same spirit. The Global Development Network, based in New Delhi, is implementing a six-county survey of migration and remittances; the pilot project in Jamaica has already been completed. It may be too late to affect the survey instrument substantially—although the GDN survey, being less well-resourced than the World Bank Africa project, is probably more amenable to be influenced by a Foundation grant to include child migration questions in their survey. In addition, the Center for Global Development, in Washington DC, is mounting a commission on migration data which will examine and make recommendations to governments and international organizations about comparability and standards for migration data (co-chaired by Larry Summers of the US and Patricia Sto. Tomas of the Philippines). It will be important for any child migration program to make inputs to the commission’s deliberations.

In addition to strengthening data collection, I wholeheartedly endorse the idea of creating a network of researchers interested in the migration of children, both from migration studies and child development studies. Moving away from, or at least supplementing, the deficit approach that emphasizes problem-solving—and problematizes migration— with a focus on asset-building seems like a good idea—though I am not entirely
sure what it means in practice. The emphasis would presumably be on building human capital assets, but I, at least, would find more explanation of this concept useful.

I will devote the rest of my comments to the concept paper’s stated mission for the proposed Child Migration Policy Network’s of ‘creating a youth focal point in the future agendas of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). (More disclosure: the author was deeply involved in the conception and execution of the first GFMD, and is serving on the Core Group of Experts for the second GFMD.)

The concept paper suggests an inexact understanding of the nature and workings of the GFMD. It will be difficult to create a “youth focal point” within the context of the GFMD because there are no subject-specific focal points in the GFMD process. Indeed, there is hardly a GFMD process at this stage. The planning for each Forum is ad hoc, and is in the hands of the hosting government (Philippines, 2008; Greece, 2009; Argentina, 2010), although it is likely that a more established support structure will evolve over the next few years. Two cross-cutting issues are supposed to inform Forum deliberations: human rights and gender. But as with most cross-cutting issues, they remain somewhat marginalized. The impact of migration on children could become another cross-cutting issue, but I am not sure that that would be a satisfactory outcome.

It is too late to influence the agenda for the second Global Forum (October, 2008), as the topics for the roundtables are already firmly set. Even the topics for the third Forum (Greece, 2009) are quite firm, if not yet cast in stone. Moreover, the Forum process is designed to be State-led, and the participating governments are adamant that they (and not NGOs, experts, or even multilateral agencies) will set the agenda and procedures for the Forums.

The best hope of influencing the Forum agenda is to recruit allies from an influential government or governments (in particular, but not exclusively, the hosting governments) to include the impact of migration on children as one of their priorities. The Forum process (such as it is) also includes a civil society element, with the Academy as one of the stakeholders in the migration discussion. The participants in the Civil Society Forum are in part self-selected, in that there is an open on-line discussion to which any one may contribute. The pattern so far has been for a national foundation of the hosting country to organize the Civil Society Forum (the King Baudoin Foundation in the case of Belgium and the Ayala Foundation in the case of the Philippines). The MacArthur Foundation has supported the Forum process; the Rockefeller Foundation could presumably do the same and would have as a result some voice in
the framing of the topics for discussion, but this would not necessarily be determinative.

Focusing the multilateral discussion of migration and development on children and youth is a long-term proposition. First, a stronger case has to be made that this is a central element in the migration and development nexus. Second, as emphasized in the papers for this conference, the evidence base to support the case must be strengthened. The proposed network of researchers must act not just as a knowledge network but as a lobby for the centrality of children and youth in understanding and strengthening the positive linkages (and mitigating the negative ones) between migration and development.

The metrics of the success of the network should shift from 2008-09 to the 2010 GFMD, which is in any case more realistic in terms of the data collection needed to build the case for the centrality of child migration.