



## Working Children: their Agency and self-organization

**By/Par**

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, 'agency' has appeared in academic writings as a new way of referring to active involvement from below in development interventions. The concept of 'agency' starts from the assumption that people are actually agents themselves, continuously acting in and reacting to circumstances. In child labour activism, this concept has been applied to working children in the understanding that, in order to improve their working conditions, children should be organised in organizations that are exclusively for and (ideally) run by working children.

This paper aims to evaluate the extent to which child labourers can become agents of change through their own organizations. The paper will draw on two studies carried out by the IREWOC foundation. In 2002 a study was undertaken in Bolivia to give practical meaning to the concept of child agency. Secondly, in 2004/2005 an investigation was carried out on the functioning and impact of children's organizations in Peru, Bolivia and Brazil. The applied research methods were mainly anthropological and used participant observation, (semi-) informal interviews and group interviewing with working children, their parents and adult representatives of the working children's organizations.

Both investigations show that in focussing on children as active participants, the structural constraints under which children have to live also need to be highlighted. One needs to understand how material poverty, mental deprivation and disempowerment help to shape resilience and defiance, but also anger, distrust and marginalisation.

## **RESUME**

Ces dernières années le terme ‘agency’ est apparu dans les écrits académiques comme une nouvelle manière de se référer à l’implication active de la base dans les interventions de développement. Le terme ‘agency’ part de l’hypothèse que les gens sont agents eux-mêmes, agissant et réagissant continûment aux circonstances. Dans l’activisme du travail des enfants, le concept a été appliqué aux enfants travailleurs dans le but de comprendre que, et dans le but d’améliorer leurs conditions de travail, les enfants doivent être organisés dans des organisations qui sont exclusivement et (idéalement) conduites par des enfants travailleurs.

Ce papier tente d’évaluer dans quelle mesure les enfants travailleurs peuvent devenir agents du changement à travers leurs propres organisations. Le papier s’appuie sur deux études de cas menées par la fondation IREWOC. En 2002, une étude a été menée en Bolivie pour donner un sens concret au concept d’agencéité des enfants. Deuxièmement, en 2004/2005, une enquête a été réalisée sur le fonctionnement et l’impact des organisations d’enfants au Pérou, en Bolivie et au Brésil. La méthode de recherche appliquée est essentiellement anthropologique et utilise l’observation participante, les entrevues informelles (semi-informelles) et les entrevues de groupes avec des enfants travailleurs, leurs parents et des adultes représentant les organisations d’enfants travailleurs.

Les deux enquêtes montrent qu’en se focalisant sur les enfants en tant que participants actifs, les contraintes structurelles dans lesquelles les enfants vivent doivent également être mises en évidence. On doit comprendre comment la pauvreté matérielle, la privation mentale et l’absence de capacité à se donner le pouvoir participent à modeler la résilience et la défiance, mais aussi la colère, la perte de confiance et la marginalisation.

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JEL Classification: I30, I31, I39, Z13

## **INTRODUCTION**

The idea of participation in development has a long history, and has been subscribed to in various forms. In recent years, the concept of ‘agency’ emerged as a new way of referring to the active involvement from below. In comparison to participation, which need not apply to active involvement at the planning and the decision making stage, agency involves a more active contribution from the subject. It assumes that the people targeted by the intervention are agents themselves, continuously acting and reacting to circumstances. In a world full of changes, challenges and choices, they are the most active players. In fact, they are agents of change in a dynamic process.

The first objective of this paper is to discuss to what extent child labourers fit into this understanding of agency. How and to what extent are working children changing social practices according to their own point of view? Finding an answer to this question was seen to be of great importance for development organisations working with child labourers and development organisations in general: by finding out to what extent working children are ‘agents of change’ one can tap or mobilise this energy to accommodate development projects for children.

Within the discussion about strategies and measures that act in the best interests of working children, there is one section of child labour specialists who have taken the concept of ‘agency’ to its extreme consequence. In improving their situation, children themselves can and should be the agents of change in ameliorating their own working circumstances. To accomplish this they must be organised in labour unions exclusively *for* children and ideally organised *by* children<sup>1</sup>.

Data on the scope of activities and the number of children involved in these organisations is quite limited in most countries. Moreover there is little evidence on how ‘tapping’ the children’s agency actually helps them to improve their working conditions. The second objective of this paper is therefore to discuss the extent to which children’s organisations are able to improve the working conditions of their members by tapping their agency. I conclude this paper with some recommendations for child centred development organisations and further research.

## **RESEARCH AREA AND METHODOLOGY**

This paper brings together the findings of two research projects the Irewoc Foundation has been working on recently: ‘Children as Agents in Development’<sup>2</sup> and ‘Working Children:

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<sup>1</sup> For example William Myers, Jo Boyden, Ben White, Per Miljeteig, Manfred Liebel.

<sup>2</sup> This investigation had as central objective to give practical meaning to the concept of ‘Child Agency’. Its results have been published in the report *Children as Agents in Development* (Irewoc 2005).

Unionisation and Participation<sup>3</sup>. Both projects had a worldwide scope. In each investigation 6 countries were selected from Africa, Asia and Latin America. The data in this paper results from the fieldwork carried out in the context of these projects in three countries in Latin America. The first part of the paper on 'Child Agency' corresponds to research carried out in Bolivia in 2002/3 in El Alto and Chirapaca (city and rural village in the highlands), Cochabamba and Tarata (city and rural village in the valley region) and Santa Cruz and El Torno (city and rural village in the tropical region). Fieldwork for the 'Unionisation and Participation' investigation was carried out in Peru, Bolivia and Brazil in 2004 and 2005. The national children's organisations under study were: Manthoc<sup>4</sup> and MNNATSOP<sup>5</sup> in Peru, UNATsBO<sup>6</sup> in Bolivia and the MNMMR<sup>7</sup> in Brazil.

Children in these areas and organisations, between the ages of 9 and 16, were involved in the study. The assumption was that beyond the age of 16, children in many developing countries, particularly among the poorer sections, have moved past adolescence into adulthood. The assumption for drawing the lower limit was that prior to that age, the capacity of conceptualising ideas is less pronounced. Over a 500 children were included in the fieldwork in Latin America. The families of the children and other adults considered important in the socialisation process of the children were also included<sup>8</sup>.

The investigations combined two types of research methods: sociological and anthropological. The sociological research aimed to obtain statistical background information on the research area and on the research population, which was then studied more intensively by means of anthropological methods. In the sociological investigation quantitative research methods were used: a study of the available statistics, questionnaires and formal interviews. The anthropological part on the other hand, consisted of qualitative research methods: participant observation and informal and semi-formal interviews. For several months the researcher lived with the families of the children in city slums and rural villages in different parts of Latin-America. Some unconventional research methods were also used: having the children taking photographs, and filming and drawing their

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<sup>3</sup> This investigation was intended to map the functioning and effects of Working Children's Organisations. Its results have been published in the report *Studying Child Labour. Policy implications of child-centred research* (Irewoc 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Manthoc = Movimiento de Adolescentes y Niños Trabajadores Hijos de Obreros Cristianos/Movement of Working Children and Adolescents Children of Christian Workers.

<sup>5</sup> MNNATSOP = Movimiento Nacional de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores Organizados de Perú/National Movement of Peruvian Organised Working Children and Adolescents. MNNATSOP is a national organisation, which groups other children's organisation such as Manthoc, Elim, Qosqo Maki, Generación.

<sup>6</sup> Union de Niños y Adolescentes Trabajadores de Bolivia/Working Children and Adolescent Movement. This is a national movement involving different NGOs and autonomous groups: Enda-Bolivia, DCI, Ecosolidar a.o.

<sup>7</sup> Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas da Rua/National Movement of Street Children.

<sup>8</sup> The parents/or guardians, schoolteachers and the adult NGO/state employees working with the children.

surroundings. These research methods were assumed to give additional information on how children value their living and working circumstances.

## 'AGENCY'

Central to the definition of agency lays the assumption that people have the ability to analyse their reality and to subsequently make decisions to change their reality accordingly. Agency is then often referred to as the process of acting to change social practices according to the actor's own point of view: "It's a state of conscience over one self, as an owner of rights and capacities to interpret the experience of life, to act, to be responsible over ones actions and learn from the consequences of these actions" (Swift 2000:124, translation by author)<sup>9</sup>. If one applies this idea of agency to children it refers to a process that "develops their capacities to realise action for themselves as an answer to different problems and difficulties they encounter" (Tolfree 2000:177). One, apparently very keen, boy of 11, and member of a children's organisation in Lima, defines agency in Anthony Swift's research as: "we are the ones that decide, who take the decisions, were autonomous, we give our own ideas. We participate in action that we realise, action that we ourselves formulate. We're the central point of our reality (Swift: 2000:131, translation by the author). According to these views children seem to have an innate capacity to learn, an innate capacity to develop and are promoted to be actors in their own development. The elements, which will bring the child or the society to development, are present in the young child and the effort should be to understand these elements (Lieten 2005: 4-7).

There exists then an extensive debate on the concept of agency. However, several questions remain underexposed. For example, the concept of agency seems to have been awarded with an inherent positivity. It is said to have empowering effects (Tolfree 2000:177), to be the best or even the only guaranty for democracy (Swift 2000:124), and the central point of departure for any development intervention directed to children (Boyden et al 1998:44-45). It remains, however, undiscussed how potentially empowering activities are often prevented of coming to fruition by the broader structural environment, which includes culture, politics and economics. It remains unclear how structural constraints under which children (and adults) have to live their lives influence their agency. As Lieten writes: "children under different circumstances are expected to react differently. A child in a pampered, and at the same time tightly controlled environment, may have less autonomy and less agency in comparison with a child that has to fend for itself on the streets of Third World cities or in the midst of a civil war. Whereas the first child may predominantly be an object of socialisation and compliance, the second child may excel by its resilience and its bravery, adjusting the rules of the game" (Lieten 2005: 3-4).

This paper attempts to illuminate some of these theoretical questions, backed up by evidence from the field.

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<sup>9</sup> See also Tolfree 1998

## AGENCY AND CHILD LABOUR

One of the sectors in which the children's agency was studied was the labour domain<sup>10</sup>. To be clear about which children we are concerned with here, it is important to define the concept of child labour. We understand child labourers as children working in contravention with ILO standards contained in the Minimum Age Convention 138 and Worst Forms Convention 182. This means that child labourers are all children below the age of 12 years old working in any economic activities, those aged between 12 and 14 performing more than 'light' work, and all children engaged in the worst forms of child labour. Not included then are activities that do not negatively affect the children's health and development or interfere with their education. Instead of child labour, these forms of lighter activities could better be understood as child work. Based on this concept of child labour, our main objective was to establish what kind of behaviours of child labourers on 'the work floor' could be categorised as agency.

Our sociological investigation showed most child labourers work to try to satisfy some of their (basic) needs, for example food, clothes and schooling. In Santa Cruz the percentage of child labourers who claimed this was 93%; in El Torno this percentage was 86% (Moreno 2002:86; 2002:149). The children's own statements made this clear; children reported to be working because "we do not have enough money to buy food", "otherwise my brother can not go to school" and "my parents are jobless".

Many children stated that they themselves had chosen to work because they felt responsible for the lack of family income and the burden poverty had imposed on other family members. Eleven-year-old Edgar, who works in a sewing atelier in El Alto, told us, "I decided to work when I saw that my mum could not cope anymore. Now I am making my own money to buy my clothes and pay for school. My mum does not have to worry about that anymore". Another example is 9-year-old Wilmer. He works during the day as a bus attendant<sup>11</sup> in El Alto and goes to school at night. He said, "Yes I like to work because they pay me so that my mum does not have to worry anymore about buying me and my sister's dinner". Many other children also mentioned that they had decided to work to bring change to the circumstances of poverty they and their families were living in. These child labourers considered themselves agents of change for the poverty of their families. This self-image as agents of change leads us to the conclusion that the mere phenomena of child labour itself can be seen as a form of agency.

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<sup>10</sup> The children's agency was studied in three domains that appeared to be central in the children's lives in the slums: the labour domain, the school domain and the family domain.

<sup>11</sup> In El Alto many children work as *voceadores*, which I have translated here as bus attendant. A *voceador* announces the destination of the bus out of an open window and collects the money from the passengers.

### **AGENCY AS SECOND BEST OPTION**

Some scholars have argued that being an agent of change by contributing to the family income has certain positive influences on the children's well being. For example Jo Boyden et al (1998) wrote:

We have learned that in the non-industrial world participation in, rather than isolation from, work is perceived to be in the children's best interest, even when it entails some hardship. Reflecting a very distinct approach to child protection and safety, children are encouraged to engage in activities that develop physical strength, endurance, confidence, dexterity, and self discipline<sup>12</sup>.

During our investigations some children had some positive statements to make about their working situations. From the sociological questionnaires we found that in Santa Cruz 30%<sup>13</sup> of the working children defined their working situation as 'good', in El Torno and Cochabamba these percentages were 56%<sup>14</sup> and 60%<sup>15</sup> respectively. This somewhat positive attitude was also expressed in some of the drawings working children made in the context of our research. When asked to draw positive images of themselves, some children surprisingly made drawings of themselves working (see appendix A).

However, data from the anthropological investigation shows that the children's positive self-image as child labourers and as positive agents of change needs to be understood in more detail. An interesting detail was that working children all agreed that none of their own children should ever have to work. The words of Marina (16), a domestic maid, illustrate this point: "No I certainly do not want my children to work. That I am working myself does not imply that I want the same for my children. I want them to have a good education and become professionals". The sociological study also indicated that children prefer a situation in which they are able to study during the day instead of work. In El Torno 82% of the working children stated that they would prefer studying during the day instead of working<sup>16</sup>, in Santa Cruz this percentage was even 84%<sup>17</sup>.

This less positive evaluation of their working situation is further supported by the fact that children use all different kinds of strategies to escape their working situation. One example

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<sup>12</sup> See also Liebel 2000, 2003; Cussianovich 1997.

<sup>13</sup> 45% thought their working situation was bad, 22% normal and 3% did not respond (Moreno 2002:106).

<sup>14</sup> 19% thought their working situation as 'bad', 21% normal, 4% did not respond (Moreno 2002:167).

<sup>15</sup> 31.30% thought children should not work, 6.90% did not see another option and 1.90% did not have an opinion (Llanos & Moreno 2003:61).

<sup>16</sup> Other percentages are: change work 9%, migrate 6%, keep working 3% (Moreno 2002:169).

<sup>17</sup> Other percentages are working 7%, change work 6%, stop working 3% (Moreno 2002:108).

of this is calling in sick. Fifteen-year-old David works in a stone factory in El Torno and attends the evening school in El Alto. He gets up at 6.30 and works until 17.00. He commented on his job: “Sometimes when I am really fed up with my work, I call in sick for a day. Then I sleep late and pass the day walking around. In this way, I recharge myself. If I do not do this I would go crazy I think”. This statement shows that David uses this strategy to change his ‘working’ situation, even though it is only for one day. Other more harsh examples of these types of strategies of temporarily changing the working situation are the so-called “forgetting strategies” such as using drugs and getting drunk. Fifteen-year-old Pablo is a shoe shiner and goes to the evening school in El Alto. One evening he confessed to being a member of the Tupac Katari gang, a gang who operates in the neighbourhood of El 16 de Julio in El Alto. Every evening after school time he and his gang go to a bar to ‘get drunk’. Once he invited me to come along. When we were sitting in the bar and the kids were already pretty drunk, I asked them why they were drinking so much. Pablo told me, ‘If you would live and work the way I do, you would also be drinking. We are working during the day, then in the evening go to school. By drinking we can really relax’.

What these examples show is that the children’s own choice to work is balanced by other forms of agency to escape their situation they have put themselves into. How is this contradiction to be explained? The explanation has to do with the fact that in most cases working children see their own decision to become labourers as only a second best solution, as it does not structurally change their circumstances.

### **AGENCY AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS**

Most children blamed a lack of job opportunities for their parents for the fact that they had to work. Even children as young as nine-year-old Luzmaira stated: “I have to help my parents as they do not have so much money. It’s that there is no work here anymore”. Young children, like Luzmaira, were vague when explaining who is responsible for this lack of job opportunities and instead blame abstract concepts such as ‘bad people’. Most of the older children however are conscious of the fact that this lack of job opportunities is a direct result of government policies, which they by and large accused of being pro-rich, pro-foreign and anti-poor. Although these criticisms of the government may appear quite ‘adultist’ in first instance, it should be remembered that most children are directly confronted with these government policies in their daily lives. The case of fifteen-year-old Ricardo’s family is illustrating. His father was working for a Bolivian mining company. Until 1985 the company he worked for was owned by the state. However, with the Decreto Supremo 21060 enacted on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1985, the Bolivian government of Victor Paz Estenssoro implemented a new political economy (Neuva Política Económica). This policy dismantled the State economy which had been built up over the last 30 years and which was characterised by a liberalisation of the internal and external economy<sup>18</sup>. One of the most dramatic acts during the new Political Economy was the closure of several state owned mines (a process called re-localisation). More than 30.000 mineworkers were laid off. The majority of them found

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<sup>18</sup> It was a part of the Structural Adjustment programmes of the IMF and the World Bank.

employment in the informal sector. Because many workers lost their jobs in national industries and the primary incomes dropped, more people per household were forced to integrate into the precarious informal market, with which the percentage of child labour increased dramatically (Grossman 2000 in UNDP 2002: 84).

Ricardo's family was directly affected by this macro economic-political policy. Ricardo's father worked in a state owned mine which was privatised by Decreto 21060. After privatisation he lost his job and received hardly any compensation. Ricardo's family migrated to the province of Santa Cruz to start a new life as subsistence farmers. However, as the soil was poor and the yield of the land not sufficient it did not provide for all family members. The economic situation of the family deteriorated and Ricardo's brother was in danger of dropping out of school. That's when Ricardo decided to go and work for the local cement factory, which involves extracting stones, and bringing them to the factory where they are made into cement. With the money he makes "my brother can stay in school and I help my parents so that we can buy sufficient food".

Ricardo's understanding of bad macro politics, although not typical for a boy of 15, is indeed a result of his own life history: "Our politicians have sold everything to foreigners, which left our parents without work. So it would be better if the politicians took back our minerals and our companies. With that money we could build more roads and more schools. And to build more roads and schools we would need more labourers. And in that way we could create work for our parents again". We encountered many children like Ricardo, whose parents could not find work, or who were laid off during recent privatisations, or those that occurred during the 80s.

As changes, according to these children, can only come about from better government policies, most children themselves feel incapable of addressing this lack of job opportunities for their parents. In the meantime children are forced to keep working, because, as eleven-year-old Edgar explained: 'My parents do not make enough money. If I do not work of what will we eat and clothe ourselves with, and of what money will my brother go to school?' Talking to another young boy about his ideal family situation, he stated: "I do think that ideally parents should have to look after the needs of their children. But the problem is that there is no work here anymore. I would really prefer not to work but I can also not watch my parents suffer".

By studying the children's agency in the labour domain it can be concluded that the children's agency is clearly shaped by structural constraints under which the children (and their parents) live their lives. By studying the children's analyses of their situation and the actions they undertake to solve their own defined problems, their agency can be seen as a "second best solution". This stems from the fact that children often do not feel capable of changing the structural constraints that cause their needs in the first place and which are related to economics, culture and politics. Since the children situate the real solution to their problems somewhere else, the question could then be posed whether or not supporting this type of child agency should always be the focus of development projects aiming to improve the situation of working children. It could be argued that in solving children's needs in the labour domain, it would be better to first address the structural constraints that children

mention, such as a lack of job opportunities, cultural notions and bad (neo-liberal) politics, instead of focussing on the children's agency.

### **AGENCY AND SELF-ORGANISATION**

One particular group involved with child labourers claims many successes with 'tapping' the children's agency when searching for solutions to the problem of child labour: the children's working organisations. These organisations defend the thought that children have to be organised into organisations exclusively *for* and ideally organised *by* children. Most of the organisations are based on a 'regulationist' perspective. In contrast to 'the abolitionists' it is not their goal to eliminate child labour, but to focus on ameliorating the circumstances under which children are made to work.

These types of organisations generally define themselves as 'children's organisations' or as 'children's communities'. They aim to create an environment where children interact and be helped to continuously process what happens in the different domains of their lives: the school, the neighbourhood, the family and their work (Chacaltana 2000:68). Besides reflecting on their reality they also want to create an environment where, if the children experience problems in these domains, they can discuss what can and needs to be done. Thus the communities aim to help the children conceptually perceive their reality and to offer solutions, which they themselves have to carry out. The children's organisations have in common the belief that working children are social subjects, in the sense that they are 'independent individuals that can judge and design their lives themselves and can give something to society' (Liebel 2000:3). In other words, the children's organisations adhere to the principle that working children can be agents of change in ameliorating their own working circumstances. Although no substantial investigation on the actual impact of these organisations was carried out by this study, successes are claimed by various scholars<sup>19</sup>.

### **ORGANISED CHILDREN: THEORY AND PRACTISE**

One of the most central discussion points for the children's organisations in Latin-America is their attitude towards child labour. The fifth meeting of the Latin American working children, for example, led to the plea: YES to work - NO to exploitation! YES to work in DIGNITY - NO to conditions without dignity. YES to WORK - no to discrimination" (Liebel 2002:267). The children's organisations have also published several documents that systematically reject the ILO Convention 182 on the eradication of child labour criticising that "The convention maintains throughout a negative view of work as something harmful and unacceptable for us as underage children" (declaration by MNNATSOP). During our interviews it was also striking to note how opinionated the organised children were on this topic. Children, especially those in the national coordination, were very clear about their

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<sup>19</sup> See among others: Boyden/Ling/Myers 1998, Cussianovich 1997, Liebel 2000, Swift 1999, Tolfree 1998.

position, stating that “work dignifies a human being, and as children are human beings, they should be given the right to dignified work” and “being against the right to work is like being against the right to survival” and that “eradication is absurd as that would mean eradication of the child labourers”.

While much of the theoretical discussion in the children’s movements evolves around solving the problem of child labour, it was interesting to see that for most of their members changing their working circumstances was not an urgent matter at all. Although many children did have (strong) opinions on whether or not to eradicate child labour, it appeared that in their own lives they were not being exploited or experiencing any serious problems. These findings were, however, related to the specific type of child labourers the children’s movements are able to target. The majority of the organised children come from deprived families, who belong to the poorer socio-economic segments of society. When observing the daily activities of the members, it was noted that most of them were occupied with light tasks for only a few hours a day, mostly within the family domain or in self-employed jobs. Few of the children were found to be working in hazardous working conditions or be performing activities that endanger their physical and mental health. Furthermore, few members had difficulties combining their activities with education. Assessing the characteristics of these children on the basis of the ILO conventions 138 and 182<sup>20</sup>, many of these children are not to be classified as child labourers. Whereas in some areas, particularly in the countryside in Peru, children were performing heavier activities, such as working in agriculture, in Lima particularly, the majority seemed to be involved in light types of work, such as helping in household tasks and working in small street trades. In UNATsBO the majority of the children were street workers, mostly shoe shiners. The overall conclusion on the status of the movement members is thus that they represent a specific segment of deprived children, in which young children who carry out heavy labour activities are underrepresented. It appears that the organisations have difficulties in reaching the neediest and most vulnerable child labourers. This again explains why the majority of organised children did not feel the need to change their working situation as their working conditions were not that severe to begin with.

## **ORGANISED CHILDREN AND THEIR AGENCY**

A very small minority of organised children stated to experience problems in their labour situation, and only in a few cases, were they able to improve their working conditions. Self-organisation provided some children with the background to increase their resilience and face temporary setbacks in their family situation as well as in their working situation. For example, groups were reported to set up saving systems with which they were able to buy necessary protection tools for on the ‘work floor’<sup>21</sup>. Although children were quite positive about these projects and participated by paying their contribution, on closer inspection the

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<sup>20</sup> 132 is the minimum age convention and 182 on the eradication of the worst forms

<sup>21</sup> In a case of a group of children working as car washers in Cusco, they were in this way able to buy rain boots to keep their feet from going to cold.

projects do not seem to stem from the children's own agency. In most cases these saving systems were initiated and owned by the adult collaborator of these groups.

The resilience of the child members was also improved by the child's rights education offered by the organisations. The knowledge of these rights gave some children the confidence to stand up to abusive employers, costumers and/or police. A good example is the case of sixteen-year-old Areceli. She has been employed since she was 11, working 5 hours a day as a waitress in a restaurant in central Lima. She told us that her employer frequently physically and verbally abused her. She used to be very shy and passively accept this situation. However, on learning about her rights in one of the groups of MNNATSOP she became more emancipated. She explained:

One day my boss yelled at me again. I just had enough. I told him he had no right to yell at me like that and that I have rights as a child. That he should not think he is more then me only because he is an adult and that I could report it to the police. I guess that scared him because he never laid his hands on me again.

Through their participation in the workshops other children came to know about the various agencies that protect their rights. On learning about these agencies, some children who experienced abuse and exploitation on the work floor indeed decided to report their situation. For example, in Bolivia the national ombudsman (Defensor del Pueblo) can be consulted in case of violations of children's rights. The Bolivia National Children's organisation therefore stimulates children to report any violations. Indeed, several members of UNATsBO have reported police abuse while working in the streets (see report Defensor del Pueblo 2003). Sometimes the mere knowledge of their rights is enough, as is shown in the following example of Jorge, a 13-year-old shoe polisher from La Paz: "If I polished someone's shoes and he does not want to pay me I get angry and say I will report him to the Defensor del Pueblo. Most of the time they get scared that I know these things and they give me money after all".

### **ORGANISED CHILDREN'S AGENCY AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS**

In these occasional cases then, being organised and receiving child rights education helps the children to be agents of change in ameliorating their own working situations. However, at the same time it was discovered that the children who were able to affect change themselves, were discovered to be those child labourers whose conditions where not so bad to start with. The children who found themselves in the most difficult working conditions appeared to be the least likely to make changes, even when they received child rights education and were aware of the agencies who could help them. Carlos, a member of a local MNNATSOP group in Lima, relayed his father's story. His father worked as a guard in a bank in central Lima. One day the bank was robbed and Carlos's father was shot in the leg, which left him handicapped. Because his mother was also incapable of working due to heart problems, Carlos, 13 at the time, had to take over the responsibility of wage earner. He has 3 brothers of 3, 6, and 9 to look after. He got a job as a baker's assistant working 8 hours a day.

According to him, he clearly finds himself in a situation of abuse and exploitation: “My boss sometimes hits me when I drop something or when I am not fast enough. Also I get paid less than my adult colleagues even though I work more”. He is aware of his situation since he followed a course at MNNATSOP on children’s rights. He also knows which agencies to go to for help. However, he chooses to endure his situation of abuse and exploitation because: “I would be crazy to claim my rights. It is at least a stable job, and relatively well paid. If I claim my rights my boss will hire another kid. And of what money will my brother go to school then?” The case of Carlos shows that children are unable to affect changes because of the structural constraints under which these children have to live and work. These structural constraints are related to the poverty of their families, which forces the children to work. When there is a need for an additional income, standing up for one’s rights is often experienced as impossible. These children often prefer to endure the situation of exploitation and abuse rather than to stand up for their rights and risk losing their vital income.

Children who find themselves in the worst cases of child labour don’t have the time to invest in an organisation. They are often unable to participate in the child rights workshops or attend the regular meetings and if they do, they attend tired and therefore unable to pay full attention. The life stories of ex-organised children Edgar and Juana illustrate this problem. Edgar was one of the few ex-members of Manthoc we were able to interview. At the time of the interview he was 16 years old and told me he had been working since he was 7. He started working as a shoe polisher in the streets of Cajamarca. He became a member when he met one of the Manthoc collaborators when he was working on the streets. In the beginning Edgar was an active participant, always concerned with the wellbeing of his fellow group members. Because of his dedication he was chosen to be group representative at age 12. However, when he was 13 years old his mother became pregnant with her 4<sup>th</sup> child. At the same time Edgar’s father lost his job and started to drink excessively. He also started to abuse his wife and tried to convince her not to have the 4<sup>th</sup> child, as according to him, they did not have the means to care for it. Edgar’s mother, however, did not want to lose the child and ran away, escaping from the constant abuse. From that moment on Edgar had to intensify his working activities. Besides shoe polishing he started to help his mother collecting fruit from the garbage, which they then sold. He also helped other people from the market by cleaning and carrying their bags. At that moment he worked more than 10 hours a day and had to drop out of school. At the same time he had to leave the working children’s movement. Edgar explained:

I had to leave MANTHOC as I could not participate anymore. Being a representative you have the responsibility over one’s whole group. This costs a lot of time you know. And I had no time anymore to invest, as I needed all my time to work.

Compare this story to that of another ex-member, 22-year-old Juana. She started to work when she was 10 by helping her mother sell fruit on the market. She helped for 4 hours in the morning and after helping her mother went to school. When she started to work Juana had a younger sister of 7 and brother of 5 who were also both going to primary school. Her father had the relative luxury of having a stable contract as a construction worker for the municipality. Juana learned about Manthoc through her friends of the market who convinced

her to become a member of the Manthoc group of Yerbateros. She liked to participate and soon became a group representative. When she was 14 one of her sisters took over her work at the market so that Juana could concentrate fully on her group activities. For her dedication she was chosen to participate in the project Gardineritos. By participating she got an education and worked for the municipality. When she became 18 she had to leave Manthoc, however the municipality kept her as a gardener. She continues to study in the evenings. She thanks Manthoc for her bright future: “thanks to Manthoc I think I will be okay. By investing time, by knowing to divide my time to all tasks I will harvest what I have sowed”. These two differing life stories makes it very clear that the structural constraints of the family situation and economic situation determine if children can take advantage of the opportunities offered by the children’s organisation or not.

### **VALUE OF THE CHILDREN’S ORGANISATIONS**

Various examples, such as those given above, show that only a few members of the working children’s organisations are able to significantly affect changes in their working conditions. It is therefore also not surprising that for many children changing their working conditions is not the most important reason for them to join. The majority of organised children experience their participation as valuable since it provides them with friendship, affection and adventure. The groups are often experienced as friend clubs and in the cases of working street children, the organisations are sometimes even perceived as ‘substitute families’, which provide a safer and caring environment than their family at home does. Children also like the games played, the opportunities to participate in meetings, discussing various themes together and to meet children from different parts of the country. The organisations clearly answer the affective and protective demands of the organised children.

The children also value the income generating projects that most children’s organisations provide. These projects are a service to supply stable, paid jobs in a safe environment for children who find themselves in exploitative and abusive working conditions. Examples of these projects are the employment programmes of Manthoc and MNNATSOP. Through these programmes children, who have been members of Manthoc for a longer period of time and who work in harsh conditions, are able to perform paid light work within the structures of the organisation. An example is twelve-year-old John, who works in the card-making project of Manthoc<sup>22</sup>. He used to sell candies on the street. He said, “working in the streets is dangerous you know, one could be harassed, hit by a car, or stabbed and stolen from. Now I have this work which is safe, I have to work less and I earn more, that’s why I am so very glad with my new job”.

The fact that the children’s organisations supply these services implies that they are also aware that for children who find themselves in the harshest conditions, implementing

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<sup>22</sup> In this project children work for about 4 hours making wishing cards. The task of the children is to cut out little figures, which they then glue to greeting cards. These again are sold in the local store and are additionally exported.

changes themselves is not an option. It seems then that there is a gap between the theory and practice within the children's organisations. In official statements children themselves are supposed to be the agents of change in ameliorating their working conditions, however, in practice, services are supplied for the children who are not capable of implementing these changes.

The overall impact study indicates that the movements, by organising children and offering child rights education, affect changes to the prospects and working conditions of certain children. However, there are difficulties in including the neediest and most vulnerable child labourers. Furthermore, when these neediest and most vulnerable are included, they are the least likely to be able to affect changes. The movements should therefore be valued for offering certain opportunities and services to poor children in general, rather than providing a direct solution for the problem of child labour by tapping their agency.

## CONCLUSION

The evidence collected by the two studies ('Child Agency' and 'Unionisation and Participation') makes it clear that structural constraints often prevent children from making *ideal* changes. This especially holds true for the neediest and most vulnerable children. The necessity of an additional income within their families means that children often chose to endure the situation of exploitation and abuse rather than stand up for their rights. Participation in the children's organisations appears to not lead to any major improvements in the working conditions of these children. It can even be stated that for children who find themselves in the worst circumstances, the children's organisations are least likely to be the solution.

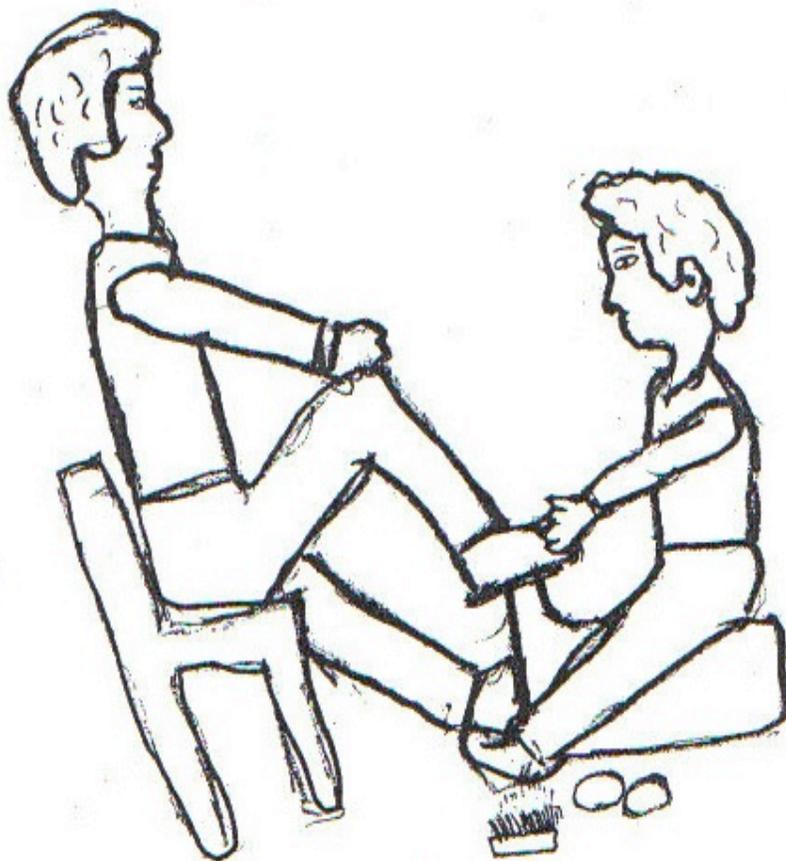
Even when children do affect changes in their working situation, they often consider these as second best solutions, since they do not address the structural constraints that cause their needs in the first place. As the children situate 'the real solution' to their problems elsewhere, supporting and encouraging this type of child agency seems to be inappropriate from the children's point of view.

This does not mean that child centred organisations should not pay attention to the phenomena of child agency. First of all, the present research has shown that a valuable form of child agency is the capacity of children to analyse and voice their own needs. An additional valuable form of child agency is their capacity to also voice their opinion about the changes needed to fulfil these needs. Any project aimed to improve children's quality of life should therefore be based on children's ability to define their own needs and propose solutions. This would greatly enhance structural development for children. Too often development projects have failed because the people targeted by these interventions could not identify with the stated objectives. Recommendations in this respect would be: stimulating social research to identify children's needs and children's solutions to their own defined needs. Incorporating children in the problem analyses of development projects as well as the project design itself would also deserve recommendation.

Besides being capable of voicing their own needs and propose solutions, this investigation has shown that children can also be active agents in implementing changes themselves. Any child centred project directed towards improving the standard of living for children should found itself on this pro-active approach. Apart from the problem analyses and proposing solutions, children can and should play an active role in actually implementing change to meet their needs. However, it often appears that children are restricted in their agency by certain structural constraints. These constraints prevent them from making the changes necessary to fulfil in their needs. This is where child centred organisations can be of real value: taking into account children's own perspectives, they could try to influence these structural constraints, which include culture, politics and economics. In this way child centred organisations become instruments for promoting positive change from the children's point of view, and can become an instrument of child agency themselves.

**APPENDIX A**

Drawing made by fourteen-year-old Domicio Zarrillo Sanchez. He works as a shoe shiner in Cajamarca. He was asked to draw an aspect of his life that he really likes and he made this drawing, stating, 'me gusta trabajar' (I like to work):



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