



# WORKING CHILDREN AS SOCIAL SUBJECTS

## The contribution of working children's organizations to social transformations

**MANFRED LIEBEL**  
Technische Universität Berlin

Key words:  
child labour, child rights, child work,  
social movements, working children

Mailing address:  
Manfred Liebel  
Technische Universität Berlin, Sekr. FR  
3-7, Franklinstraße 28/29,  
D-10587 Berlin, Germany.  
[email: manfred.liebel@tu-berlin.de]

*Childhood* Copyright © 2003  
SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks  
and New Delhi, Vol 10(3): 265-285  
www.sagepublications.com  
[0907-5682 (200308)10:3; 265-285;030416]

The article focuses on the question of what significance the organizations of working children, which have sprung up in various regions of the Third World since the 1980s, have for processes of transformation in their societies. First, it looks at the common ground shared by the working children and their organizations in different countries. Second, it discusses what kind of social subject emerges from this discussion. Finally, the article asks what possible effects these organizations have on the children themselves or on the society around them.

Working children's social movements and organizations have emerged since the 1980s in many regions of the southern hemisphere. They have proved that working children can competently speak up for themselves. They have even convinced some self-assured adult 'child labour experts' that their voices can no longer be talked over or ignored. The Norwegian social scientist Per Miljesteig, for example, is trying to convince the World Bank that working children must be viewed as partners and must have the opportunity to participate in decisions made by the World Bank (Miljesteig, 2000). Another example is the French social scientist Michel Bonnet who – despite playing a decisive role between 1991 and 1996 in the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) on behalf of the International Labour Organization (ILO) – thoughtfully commented in 1999 that 'one shouldn't be hypnotised by the problem of child labour, but instead should open one's eyes and ears to working children and listen to what they have to say to us' (Bonnet, 1999: 11). But exactly what do working children have to say to us and what sphere of influence can they actually attain? Apart from large cultural and social differences, are there similarities in the way of thinking and acting among the working children of the South?

In my analysis I refer to statements made at the regional and international meetings of delegates of children's organizations since 1994,<sup>1</sup> to

(mostly unpublished) protocols of children's gatherings, to the testimonies of actors in the children's organizations (ENDA Jeunesse Action, 1997; Grillo and Schibotto, 1992; IWGCL, 1998: 61–9; Liebel, 1996, 2001b; *Voice of African Children*, 2001), as well as to documentary and evaluative reports by adult interpreters. Such reports exist on India (Swift, 2001),<sup>2</sup> West Africa (Coly, 2001; Swift, 1999: 25–30; Terenzio, 2001; Tolfree, 1998; Touré, 1998) and several Latin American countries (see, among others, Cussiánovich, 2001a; Figueroa and Cussiánovich, 2001; Ifejant, 1996, 1997, 1998; Schibotto, 1990, 2001; Swift, 1999: 12–24; Tolfree, 1998). In the case of Latin America, I can additionally refer to my own experiences and investigations (Liebel, 1994, 2000, 2001a, 2001b).

In order to define significant aspects of the movements and organizations of working children, all the interpretations I am familiar with refer to the notion of 'social subject'. In the children's remarks, however, this term is very seldom used. Nevertheless, we can ask them in this regard whether the image they have of themselves can be adequately interpreted via the idea of social subject.

First, I look at the common ground that working children and their organizations in different countries and continents share. Then I discuss what category of social subject emerges from this discussion, from two perspectives. First, how far is this common ground expressed via the idea of 'social subject'. Second, which specific social and cultural prerequisites is the discussion of the social subject linked to. Finally I ask what effects these organizations can have on the children involved or on the society around them.

### **Common ground between working children's organizations**

The working children's organizations consist mainly of children between the ages of 12 and 16 years. Most of them work in the so-called informal sector of large cities, on the streets and in open places, but also as domestic servants of rich families. Many immigrated with their parents, brothers and sisters, or alone, from the country to the city, or were born in the city as children of immigrants. By far the majority live and work under conditions that violate their human dignity and endanger their personal development.

Most children's organizations came about with the support of adult humanitarian organizations and involve adults. Not infrequently did the initiative come from grown-ups, but the *raison d'être* of the children's organizations consists of their being lead by the children themselves. The organizations have their own structures and norms and develop their own ideas, demands and forms of action, which arise from the living and working situation of their actors. The organizations are not always on a national scale; in Africa and India they generally comprise of unions in just a few cities. Now and then, children of certain 'work groups' (e.g. shoe cleaners, load carriers)

join together in associations of which the scope of action is concentrated on their own jobs. In West Africa sometimes children from the same village or country of immigration join together.

Despite all the differences in the forms of organization, the origins and the cultural contexts of the working children, various similarities can still be found.

### 1.

The children's organizations base their claims on the worldwide obligation of respect for human rights, especially the rights set down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These rights are partly reformulated in terms of language and shaped to the children's specific situation, and partly supplemented by new rights. An example for this are the '12 Rights' that were jointly formulated by West African children's organizations in 1994 and are reaffirmed at yearly meetings:

- The right to vocational training in order to learn a job;
- The right to stay in the village and not move away;
- The right to carry out our activities safely;
- The right to access to fair justice in case of problems;
- The right to sick leave;
- The right to be respected;
- The right to be listened to;
- The right to a light and limited type of work, adapted to our ages and abilities;
- The right to have health care;
- The right to learn to read and write;
- The right to have fun and to play;
- The right to express ourselves and organise ourselves. (cited in Liebel, 2001c: 205, with partly differing wording; see also *Voice of African Children*, 2001)

In a statement of the working children of Madagascar (1996), the following rights were demanded:

- To be able to work freely without being hassled or subjected to force;
- To be allowed to live our life fully and move around freely;
- To be treated like everyone else. (cited in Liebel, 2001c: 216)

In Latin America, the children's organizations specifically emphasize rights that concern their participation in society. At their fifth meeting, which took place with the participation of delegates from 14 countries in Lima in 1997, it was stated that the rights to participation provided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 'are not sufficient, for they are not respected in practice' (cited in Liebel, 2001d: 172). In Latin America as well as in Africa, another right is demanded over and over again, albeit expressed in varying wording, which is not included in the UN convention at all: the right of children to work (see Liebel, 2001e).

These examples, just some among many, illustrate that it has become normal for the self-organizing children to understand themselves as 'subjects

of rights', that is as owners of certain rights, to whose fulfilment they are entitled. The children's organizations also interpret and adapt to suit their own particular situation and interests the rights passed by adults. Furthermore, they do not leave the fulfilment of rights to the good intentions of adults, but rather take things into their own hands.

## 2.

The working children who come together in these organizations are convinced that not only do they have their own rights, but they are also capable of working to ensure the realization of these rights independently. They see themselves not only as profiteers or as objects of the goodwill or the concern of adults or of the institutions created by them, but as independent individuals who can judge and design their lives themselves and can contribute something to society. The statement of the Fifth Meeting of the Working Children of Latin America and the Caribbean (1997) serves as an example. It reads:

Our organisations are fighting day by day for better working and living conditions, for our rights to suitable education of good quality, for better health conditions, for opportunities to meet in order to carry out common actions, to be the protagonists in our lives ourselves and to be recognised as social subjects in our societies. (cited in Liebel, 2001d: 172)

The discussion on the 'social subject' goes beyond the discussion on 'subject of rights', since it stresses the ability of the individuals and of the organizations created and maintained by the children to play an independent role in life and society, based on the individuals' own judgement and capacity to act. This conception is not specific to children's organizations in Latin America, but is also found in the children's organizations of Africa and India.

## 3.

The working children's organizations constantly reiterate that they deserve social recognition for their performance. They declared in the statement of the First World Meeting of Working Children in Kundapur, India (1996): 'We want respect and security for ourselves and the work that we do' (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 351). The 'work' mentioned in the statement refers both to the working children as people, who accomplish a job that is useful to their families and society, as well as to the organizations of children that perceive the socially important task of contributing to the improvement of social relationships and to achieving more justice. Sometimes in this context the children are spoken of as 'economic subjects' and the children's organizations as (collective) 'political subjects'.

Not all children's organizations claim the 'right to work', with reference to the economic contribution of the children to society, but all agree that their actual work can no longer be devalued and discriminated but rather

must be socially acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> In the current praxis of viewing work by children only from the aspect of its damaging effects, forbidding it and attempting its general abolition ('abolitionism'), children see their own subject-existence and human dignity violated. In the same breath, they try hard to achieve legislation that will improve their working conditions and make it easier for them to work with dignity. The statement of Kundapur ends as follows:

We are against exploitation at work; but we are in favour of work with dignity and appropriate hours, so that we have time for education and leisure. (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 351)

And the First Mini World Summit of Working Children in Huampaní-Lima ends with the appeal:

YES to work – NO to exploitation! YES to dignified work – NO to undignified conditions! YES to work – NO to marginalization! YES to work – NO to discrimination! (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 353)

At the Second Mini World Summit of Working Children in Dakar (1998) it was stated:

We want all the world's children to be able one day to decide whether to work or not. (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 354)

#### 4.

The organizations of working children on all continents call for an equal relationship between children and adults. They argue vehemently against being disregarded because of their youth, and hindered from making their own decisions (being a 'minor'). They want to be taken seriously as persons, listened to and paid attention to. They insist on being allowed to question the supremacy of adults, and expect the latter to explain and give reasons for their actions and decisions and that these should concern the present and future of the children. Their claim to their own independence and their own decision-making powers is substantiated by their declaration that children are people with their 'own rights' and have the right to human dignity, that they have specific needs and skills and best know their own situation and, finally, how this corresponds to democratic relations. Only thus do they learn to act responsibly. They refer especially to how they as working children have already taken on economic responsibility and contribute to the development of society.

The independence they claim concerns both the individual child as well as the children's organizations. The statement of Kundapur begins with the words: 'We want recognition of our problems, initiatives, proposals and our process of organization' (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 351). The final statement of the First Mini World Summit of Working Children from Huampaní-Lima (1997) declared: 'Up to now, we have been listened to, but our opinions have not been taken into account. We have the right to organise

ourselves, but our organisations have not been legally recognized' (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 352) – and only then will working children be able to 'sign contracts, open bank accounts, set up cooperatives, have social security' (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 353).

## 5.

Working children's organizations do not restrict themselves to demanding independence and autonomy, but also insist on codetermination in society. As the Kundapur statement declares: 'We want to be consulted on all decisions concerning us, at the local, national and international level' (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 351). In the statement of the Second Mini World Summit of Dakar this codetermination is clearly demanded for their organizations: 'Working children's movements should be consulted before any decisions are taken about their work. If decisions are to be made, let them be made jointly by all concerned' (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 354). In the final declaration of the Fifth Meeting of the Working Children of Latin America, the claim to participation refers especially to education politics, work politics and social security and community development. It also criticizes the fact that the children are indeed 'protected', but are not allowed to take part in the development of such 'protection' programmes (see Liebel, 2001d: 172).

The claim to participation shows that self-organizing working children do not position themselves on the fringes of society, but rather define themselves as a legitimate and equal part of it. By doing this, they reflect their experience of double marginalization: on one side the worker, whose work power may be claimed by society, but whose effort is not recognized, but rather devalued and negated; and on the other side, the children, who solely because they have not yet reached (from an adult's perspective) a certain age, have their ability to judge questioned and are denied (political) participation in the organization of society. This double marginalization is further fuelled by an economic and political praxis that risks the lives of the children along with the lives of people. At the end of the report of the Fifth Meeting of the Working Children of Latin America it is declared:

We NATs [working children and adolescents] from Latin America and the Caribbean, like our friends in Africa and Asia, see ourselves as *producers of life*, opposed to the culture of death which refuses us any rights and our complete integration in society. Not to recognise this, means excluding us still more than hitherto. To speak at the time of civil rights is mockery. (cited in Liebel, 2001d: 172; emphasis in the original)

## 6.

The working children understand their organizations as a means to gain more influence in their society as well as to bring about a better life. At the Fifth Meeting of the Working Children of Latin America this is expressed as follows:

Our organisations have shown themselves to be the best way of protecting us

from exploitation, mistreatment and disparagement by society. Within our organisations, we feel ourselves to be dignified, able and fully-fledged persons who take pride in our work. Here we educate and train ourselves, and find a place for solidarity and for the working out of proposals for alternatives to the existing system of poverty and violence, which is unacceptable to us. (cited in Liebel, 2001d: 172)

Maybe more than in the case of adult organizations, the children's organizations are a social field in which the children can gain experience of equal and respectful relationships and become aware of their skills and options. Not only does this help them to know and learn to value themselves better, but also to judge their situation better and their possibilities for action. The children's organizations are a social space, in which the children can experience themselves as social subjects and improve themselves. They thereby become a cultural project that holds a mirror up to the society (of the adults) and brings forth new visions and practical approaches for a better life.

### **The subject-understanding of the children's organizations**

The discussion of the social subject signals that children – no matter what age – are both people with their 'own rights' ('subjects of rights') as well as people with specific characteristics and abilities, who are to be appreciated and respected by their fellow (adult) human beings. This vision of the child stands in opposition to a view and social praxis that regards and handles children solely as 'objects', whether to serve the adults in whatever way (i.e. in that they are to be exploited or manipulated), or whether in order to protect them (i.e. in that they are to be kept apart from the supposedly dangerous world of adults). Considering children as social subjects does not negate the necessity of offering children protection in certain circumstances, but it insists that this may not happen at the cost of their right to power sharing and participation. Children count as principally having rights and being able to take part in all decisions that concern them and to ultimately determine their own lives.

The movements and organizations of working children are paradigmatic of this. They are, for one, proof that children can take their interests and rights into their own hands even under difficult conditions, and at the same time show how children can blossom under favourable conditions and improve themselves as social subjects.

The discussion of the social subject and the way the subject-existence manifests itself in the children's organizations, however, depends on certain social and cultural conditions. The organizations of working children come into being in an urban context and under the influence of the (medial and educational) spread of 'new' ideas about individual and social 'human rights' in general and about corresponding rights for children particularly. At the same time they react to conditions that have first arisen with the spread of the capitalist way of business, and have led to new forms of the 'survival

economy' in the 'peripheral' societies of the Third World in which children have a significant place.

This survival economy has, as do the roles of the children in it, different faces. It is partly characterized by a new kind of poverty and the necessity to survive 'on one's own'; that is, it is distinguished by competition, isolation, violence and exploitation of whoever is weaker. However, it also contains many elements that feed from experiences of life and business under non-capitalist conditions, and that perhaps could also be seen as characteristic of the basic anthropological existence of humankind, i.e. mutual help, consideration for the weaker (whether old, very young or sick), respect for the economic contribution of the children and for their (age-)specific needs and attributes.

It is probable that these differing facets also figure in the thoughts and actions of the working children. However, it is just as likely that the working children's organizations above all embody such ways of thinking and acting that are aimed at social and collective solutions to problems, like mutual help and mutual respect. For their subject-understanding this could mean that elements of the bourgeois subject-understanding are combined with elements of traditional cultures and business practices and initiate ways of thinking and subject practices that have no connection to the western bourgeois model. This could mean furthermore that specific characteristics and forms of action of the children's organizations emerge in the various countries and regions under the influence of traditional cultures and approaches to life, alongside the things they share in common referred to earlier.

I investigate these questions more closely in three stages. First, I critically reconstruct with recourse to the reflections of Alain Touraine (1995) the 'original' concept of subject and investigate how far the children's organizations implicitly concur with it. Second, I ask whether a new kind of childhood is developing in the working children's organizations, which is no longer compatible with the 'original' bourgeois or modern western understanding of subject and childhood, or even might extend beyond this. Third, I ask to what extent and how the subject-understanding of the children's movements is connected to regional cultures and traditions, and whether specifically new and different conceptions and practices of the subject emerge out of this.

The concept of 'subject' is a child of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It came into being and was first put to the test in the bourgeois society of the western world. It marks a view of people and their position in the world that in other, non-European cultures is not or only in a modified way accepted. According to the idea of 'subject', a person stands at the centre of the world and is meant to do so and is able to recognize this and master it. To be or to become a subject means to be no longer at the mercy of the power of others, but rather to freely devise one's own environment and life. Along with this is a way of thinking that understands the person as a self-



assured individual and possessor of individual rights that are equally applicable all people. Consequently, traditions and hierarchies that have been asserted and legitimized in whatever way principally lose their validity and are at the disposal of a critical, rationally based way of thinking and a 'transforming' praxis aimed at the equality of all people.

The working children's movements personify this modern western way of thinking to a degree, and contribute to its spread in the non-western world by, for example, questioning traditional age hierarchies and establishing new, more egalitarian relationships between the generations. But they also personify a massive criticism of different aspects of the western bourgeois way of thinking and behaviour and pave the way for an understanding of the subject until now unknown or unaccepted in the western world.<sup>4</sup>

In accordance with other social movements of repressed and excluded population groups in the South, the working children's organizations reclaim and practise a subject-understanding and a subject-existence based on human dignity and the respect for human life. By doing this, they turn against a praxis and a way of thinking that indeed may stress the freedom of the individual, but does not care what economic and social conditions that freedom is based on. Furthermore, what becomes of the life and human dignity of those shut out from economic and political power. The subject-promise of the bourgeois society, to make 'freedom, equality and brotherhood' possible for *all* people through freedom of the individual, has been left hollow and perverted. It has even contributed to bringing forth social relationships that are based on rape and exploitation and contempt for the greater part of humankind by a privileged minority.

In his work *Critique of Modernity* (1995), Alain Touraine critically reconstructed the modern western concept of subject in a way that approaches the subject-understanding of working children's movements and their criticism of its perversion in today's world, without explicitly referring to the social movements of the Third World. He sees human life in 'modernity' as 'fragmented'. This makes it hard for people to have a comprehensive view of themselves, their relations to other people and their position in the world. According to Touraine, human existence has been split into a life as consumer, as producer, as owner, as holder of rights, as member of a nation, an ethnic group, a community, a business enterprise, etc. Though the subject cannot be understood as a means of reuniting the fragments of modernity, it is the subject that 'does connect them by weaving a dense web of relations of complementarity and opposition' (Touraine, 1995: 220). The 'idea of a subject' hates the tendency 'to be identified with any of the shattered fragments of modernity'; above all, the subject cannot simply be confused 'with the freedom of a consumer in a well-supplied market' (Touraine, 1995: 220).

A further consideration of Touraine's refutes a purely contemplative understanding of the subject, in the sense of a simple 'condition of the soul'. The idea of the subject cannot be separated from the idea of the social actor.

'The subject is an individual's will to act and to be recognized as an actor' (Touraine, 1995: 207). In reference to Sigmund Freud he shows how the expressions 'individual', 'subject', 'actor' are to be understood in a mutual relationship. They can certainly distance themselves from each other in social reality, but by doing so, they signal a 'civilisation's new discontent', that is characterized by a 'narcissistic individualism' (Touraine, 1995: 209). 'The Subject is not a soul as distinct from a body, but the meaning the soul gives to the body, as opposed to the representations and norms imposed by the social and cultural order' (Touraine, 1995: 210).

It is therefore consistent that Touraine places the subject in relation to the social movement. He even speaks of the subject as identical with the social movement. He understands 'a collective actor whose primary goal is the defence of the subject' as a social movement. It represents 'at once a social conflict and a cultural project' (Touraine, 1995: 240).

The social movements of working children correspond to this description. They can be understood as collective attempts to overcome imposed exclusion and contempt and to achieve the social recognition of working children as active and productive subjects, and at the same time, as attempts to establish new kinds of social relationships, that contradict the ruling individualism and its corresponding competitive mentality. This is possibly where the reason lies why different interpreters of these movements expressly use the category of the *social* subject. The movements are also not to be comprehended as simple executors of the modern western way of thinking – like other social movements of repressed and excluded population groups of the South – but rather they represent a view of human existence in the world that has either never been achieved or has already been abandoned by the bourgeois-capitalistic societies of the West.

The subject-understanding and the subject-praxis of the working children's organizations also go beyond the modern western understanding of *childhood*. According to this understanding, the children are indeed granted a certain autonomy and given protection from risks, but these concessions happen at the cost of an active and responsible role for the children in society. The children are practically excluded from adult life and assigned to special reservations in which they are 'raised', 'educated' and prepared for the future. Their possible influence on this future is confined to the individual 'qualification' of each person, yet not to decisions about the arrangement of social relationships. These remain reserved for the adults or the power elite.

With the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child the children are as a matter of fact granted for the first time the right to express their opinion and organize themselves according to their own interests, yet these new rights offer them no guarantee of actually playing an equal role in the society. The diverse models of child participation that have since been worked out and practised in various parts of the world almost always restrict them-

selves to relatively marginal questions of social design, i.e. the planning of children's playgrounds and of other institutions specially designated for children, or they exhaust themselves in the formal simulation of the political forms of adults, i.e. child parliaments or child mayors. Access to the world and to the decisions of adults remains fully denied to them.

The claim to equal rights and participation, as demanded by the working children's organizations in different parts of the Third World, is incompatible with the modern western understanding of childhood and also goes beyond any participatory concessions achieved in the meantime. The children's organizations insist not only on being heard in all questions concerning them but also on being able to actively co-decide.<sup>5</sup> They demand, for example, at international level, to have as equal a representation, with seat and voice, in the committees of the ILO as governments, labour unions and employer organizations. How radically this claim, which refers also to the design of their countries and their immediate environment, clashes with the dominant views of the social role and status of childhood shows itself in how it repeatedly meets with significant difficulties and resistance, even in the very institutions and with the very people that are in favour of children's rights and try hard to achieve them (see Liebel et al., 2001: 'Introduction'; Sanz, 1997).

The resistance is probably so great not only because the children demand more participation and influence, but also because they explicitly present themselves as *working* children and insist that their work be recognized by society and that 'the right to work in dignity' should be an option for all children. With that they contradict a further essential element of the modern western understanding of childhood, that which aims at a strict separation between childhood and work and would therefore abolish every form of child work. For the subject-understanding of the children's organizations work is therefore just as important as participation, as they understand the child not merely as a 'contemplative' and 'private' subject, who only cares for his or her own personal and individual future, but rather as a responsible social subject, who is an integral part of society and who, along with others, makes a mark on society with his or her daily actions – just as much as society without children could not maintain or reproduce itself.

The subject-understanding of the children's organizations results not only from the fact that children already work and with their work produces 'social usefulness', but in my opinion is also influenced by cultural traditions that are ignored in the modern western understanding of childhood. In Native Indian cultures in Latin America, as in many 'local' cultures in Africa, it is usual to pass on responsibility early to children, by entrusting to them activities that are important for the community. These activities can be strenuous and not devoid of risk, but they are chosen or measured so that the children are not overtaxed and it is possible for them to become stepwise acquainted with the activities and arrange them at their own discretion. The

work taken on is not only important for the community, but also gives the children the opportunity to learn essential life skills. Furthermore, they are not strictly separated from playful forms of action, but rather give the children the chance to try out their strengths and mobility and live out their fantasies and ideas (for examples, see Liebel, 2001a: 99–135; van de Loo and Reinhart, 1993; Ortiz Renascaniere, 1994).

Although the children are bound in a ritualized age order, in which the precedence of the older is set over the younger, they often already enjoy rights that do not emerge at all in the modern western way of thinking on children's rights. It is a widespread praxis among native American and African peoples to pass on their animals and cultivatable land to the children, which they can use according to their own judgement and for which they are responsible. Or they are entitled to a share of the milk or a proportion of the new-born animals. With their own house-pets, for instance, the children are held responsible for any damage they might cause. In this way, the children are taken seriously and receive recognition for the responsibilities they take on and the work they perform. In a study originated in Bolivia on childhood in rural areas, these and similar practices are understood as 'a specific form to make concrete and define the place of children as subjects and owners of rights' (Molina Barrios and Rojas Lizarazu, 1995: 89). They have an importance which should not be underestimated for the autonomy and participation of children in social life.

My speculation that the subject-understanding of working children's organizations is influenced by this and similar experiences and memories, has not previously been supported by research. It relies on the fact that the majority of children active in these organizations either come from migrant families or have themselves emigrated from the country, and that in the poor urban quarters in which these children are growing up, the original traditions are maintained and to a degree influence the form of the survival economy. In Africa, at least, it is part of the basic understanding of the children's organizations that a relationship be maintained with their villages and the possibility of their return be held open. The 'right to stay in the village' demanded by them (see the '12 Rights' listed earlier) is elaborated on as follows: 'We want to remain in our villages to develop the activities that allow us to be responsible for our own future. To do this, we must organise ourselves in our villages' (cited in Liebel, 2001b: 208). In Latin America, many clues can be found in the testimonies of the working children themselves that the memory of Indian traditions is still alive. At many meetings of the children's organizations the memory of the pre-colonial epoch of their continent is presented as good reason for considering alternatives to the present misery.

The subject-understanding of the children's organizations cannot however be seen simply as a revival of traditions. It also results from an entirely new kind of experience. The expectation of the African children to develop activities in order to care for themselves does refer to life in the village, but

without the new 'urban' experiences and living conditions probably would not have been formulated as such. The idea that children organize themselves in order to care for themselves assumes that children are left to their own devices, whether because the traditional caring communities break down or because an 'autonomous life' and 'making one's own decisions' become a desirable life-goal for the children.

The ways of thinking, viewing things and acting represented by the children's organizations are creative answers to hardships and life-experiences that are mostly new to the children. For one, they as children have just begun their life, and for another, the societies in which they grow up find themselves in a social and cultural time of change. The children fall back for an understanding and resolution of their problems on the one hand on the cultural traditions of their communities and ethnic groups, and on the other hand on the 'modern' international discussion of human rights that has reached them via the media and through humanitarian or educational aid projects. From these not infrequently contradictory 'models', the children formulate their own answers. Their organizations thereby take on tasks that no one in their societies relieves them of. I illustrate this with the example of more recent developments in southern Africa, and refer to the reflections of Kurt Madörin that were formulated for the project work of the Swiss organization *Terre des Hommes* in Tanzania.

In Zimbabwe, Zambia, Uganda, Tanzania and other countries of southern Africa the number of children who must care for themselves and their brothers and sisters ('children-headed households') has increased considerably as a result of the growing poverty and the spread of AIDS. In Tanzania it has been estimated that by the year 2010 about a quarter of all children under 15 will have lost one or both parents. The traditional system of the 'extended family' has certainly shown a remarkable capacity of absorption, but has in the meantime reached its limits and is no longer able to integrate the children. In many cases the 'extended family' only consists of grandparents, who will soon die. The orphan children become a new type of working children. They carry out not only special functions within the family, but must search for any kind of work on their own initiative in order to survive. Many of these children emigrate to the cities and try to make it on the streets.

So far – in contrast to western Africa and Latin America – working children's organizations play a small role in the aforementioned countries.<sup>6</sup> However, due to the rapidly growing number of children that care for themselves and take on an important position in society, the significance of and necessity for the children's own representations of interest is being rethought. UNAIDS, for example, came to the conclusion in its 1999 World AIDS Campaign with Children and Young People, 'Listen, Learn, Live – Key Issues and Ideas for Action', that it is necessary 'to have young people represented on the board of directors of different organisations such as AIDS

NGOs, youth development organisations . . . to bring the youth perspective to these groups'. Doubt is growing as to whether it makes sense to regard children only as victims. This way of seeing things, which often coincides with the view of children as dependants, blocks

. . . the seeing of what orphans perform in work, care, familial support, psychological adaptation etc. They go to school under aggravated conditions. Girls . . . manage whole families, boys help out with the field work and take on unfamiliar house-chores. From this viewpoint the children and adolescents are not 'needy victims' but equal people with specific interests and needs and with their own initiatives. (Madörin, 1999)

The initiatives of the children born from necessity form the germs of their organizations. However, they develop only when the children find a certain degree of acknowledgement for their efforts and for their new kind of independence, and when in the respective societies adults find themselves ready 'to accompany the initiatives coming from the children and adolescents with advice, criticism and support, and so to help them to open perspectives of their own' (Madörin, 1999). In this way, it would become possible for the children to see themselves first and foremost not as beings in lack but as successful survivors.

### **Social transformations through children's organizations?**

What is a possible route of action in Tanzania and other countries of southern Africa is a living, albeit fragile, reality in many countries of West Africa and Latin America. Here I try to break down the synthesis and transformation efforts of the local working children's organizations into the elements that seem particularly important to me. I therefore put forward hypothetical considerations that have yet to be more closely empirically examined.

The children's organizations embody an 'independent childhood' that has previously not existed in this particular form. It passes by traditional age hierarchies just as it does the 'autonomic' childhood of the modern western pattern. This new independence is the claim to equal social status and effective social participation. The claim to participation and the daily praxis of the children's organizations are not confined to 'children's matters', but extend to all aspects of human life that have an 'existential' meaning for personal and social development. The daily life of the working children is still far short of the fulfilment of these claims, but the public actions of the children's organizations and their example of 'lived participation' let the claims appear legitimate and plausible and lay the way for a cultural change of perspective on childhood.

It becomes more feasible that children can have their own ideas, make suggestions and give their society fresh impetus. The conventional idea that children are only 'empty containers' and because of their age have no skills at their disposal, is put into question by the actions of the children's organi-

zations. It becomes harder to legitimize the idea that children must only behave and may not question the actions of adults. The actors of the children's organizations repeatedly demonstrate that they are treated in their surroundings with increasing respect and see themselves taken more seriously. An example for this is the Final Declaration of the Fifth Meeting of the African Movement of Working Children and Youth (2000), which states:

In those places where we are organised, our 12 Rights have considerably progressed for us and for other Working Children and Youth. We can now learn to read and write, we benefit from better healthcare, we can express ourselves, we are respected by everyone as well as by the Judiciary, we are well treated and can work in safer environments, working in a manner in line with our capacities and can rest sometimes. (cited in Liebel et al., 2001: 355)

The organized working children report that they receive more appreciation and support from their parents because they are proud of their children, and believe they can express themselves better and are listened to more often.

Research methods and political forms in which the working children only function as objects are increasingly being questioned, which is probably due in no small part to the actions of the children's organizations. For example, the Colombian sociologist María Cristina Salazar criticizes the fact that in the mid-1990s, 'very few studies about children's work have used participatory techniques in which the voice of the children themselves is heard, despite the fact that this is a minimal requirement in order to understand the reality of these children' (Salazar, 1995: 76). Or the International Working Group on Child Labour asks 'Have we asked the children?' (IWGCL, 1997), in view of the praxis. The IWGCL demands the participation of the children's organizations, and declares that 'to encourage and facilitate the participation of children in debates about their work' is one of its 'most important objectives' (IWGCL, 1998: Executive Summary).<sup>7</sup> This goal has until now certainly not been achieved in political decision-making arenas (e.g. within governments or the ILO), but the claim to participation of the children's organizations has found so many renowned supporters (see, for example, Boyden et al., 1998: 214), that it is no longer so easy to push it off the public stage.

In other countries, the organizations of working children play a different influential role. They are not a power factor able to directly force the political and economic elite into certain decisions. Their role is more of a symbolic nature and their influence depends to a large measure on whether in their countries there are the political structures and social climate that promote participatory processes. The existence of social movements and initiatives that continually try hard to achieve respect for human rights and the realization of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is of equal importance. If this is the situation, then it is also more likely that the children's organizations will find support from adults and especially from NGOs.

In some countries the children's organizations are explicitly acknowledged by governments, local administrations and social organizations as representatives of the working children and as partners in negotiations. In Nicaragua, agreements between the Ministry of Health and the national police were successfully forged that above all benefited the working children on the street. In Lima, Peru, a contract with the city authorities was drawn up that gave paid work under dignified conditions to a few hundred children over 12 years old. In Dakar, Senegal, the police recognize the membership identification card of the children's organizations and treat the working children with more respect. In Bolivia, the central trades union organization enrolled the local associations of shoe cleaners, salespersons and other child workers as member organizations and pledged to work hard for their better working conditions.

In most cases, the influence of the children's organizations cannot be read in formal agreements, but instead leads to improvements in the daily life of the children. These may not be very conspicuous but are noticeable for the children. In Dakar, for example, domestic servants tend to be treated with more respect and can meet with other children and youth in their free time. The working children seeking help in health care facilities are no longer discriminated against but rather are taken care of without reservation. In some countries where children's organizations are active, the tone with which the media treats the working children has changed. The children are substantially less frequently discriminated as vagrants and potential thieves, but rather are expressly appreciated as working children who support their families. Their work is described as a positive alternative to begging and stealing. In other cases, the children's organizations have got the local authorities to repair bridges and streets that are often used by the children. Or they have made school directors and school administrators show consideration for working children and take their experiences seriously in lessons. In a few cases, they have even developed a curriculum specially for working children. In some city quarters the children who have organized also actively take part in neighbourhood drives for the improvement of living conditions and are accepted as helpful partners who are to be taken seriously despite earlier reservations.

In some countries, children's organizations have been able to gain substantial influence in child and youth legislation. In Brazil, for example, participation laws were enacted and in Peru the explicit right of children over 12 to work in dignified conditions has become law. Overall, the children's organizations have given the discussion on children's rights a new momentum, filled it with life and, above all, furthered the social conscience, that children must be involved in the legal regulation of their concerns and that their organizations must be legally recognized.

The contribution of children's organizations to social transformations is taking place not only by way of publicly stated suggestions and demands.



At least as important is the fact that children's organizations contribute to the improvement of living conditions of working children through their own initiatives and projects. The praxis of mutually supporting each other in emergencies is widespread, e.g. when a child is seriously ill and urgently needs money for medical treatment or when a child is left alone and homeless by the sudden death of his or her mother. In some organizations 'community registers' exist, into which the children pay small contributions or for which they raise money in order to have a fund for emergencies or common projects. On the path to self-help, training courses are organized to get better jobs. They have even devised their own forms of economy ('self-sustaining economic projects'), that makes it possible for the children to work and earn money under conditions determined by themselves (more examples are to be found in Liebel, 2001a: 245–9).

The children's organizations cannot completely change the living conditions of the children through such initiatives and projects. Nor can they bring to a close the structural causes of exploitation and poverty which are forged by the capitalist economy. They often 'only' ease the difficulties of the children's lives and reduce the risks a little. However, in view of the permanent threat of death overhanging many of these children, this is not to be underestimated.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, these initiatives promote not only solutions to the daily existential problems of the working children, but can also empower them in the community, promoting their acknowledgement by society and influencing the social conscience about the position and role of children in society. It becomes easier to envisage children taking on tasks essential to their livelihood when they are seen to be done in a responsible and organized way, and the work of children can take on completely new forms and gain new meanings than are usually associated with 'child labour'.<sup>9</sup> The children's organizations demonstrate through their own 'economic' praxis that work does not have to be put on a par with exploitation, that it does not inevitably stand in opposition to the needs of children to play and learn and that it can even contribute to promoting the personality development of the children (see Overwien, 2000: 627–36). In this way, they also stimulate the social imagination about alternatives to an economic and social system essentially based on the exploitation of human work power.

## Notes

1. Explicitly, I refer to the official reports and final declarations of the following meetings: the First World Meeting, in Kundapur, India, 24 November–8 December 1996; First Mini World Summit, Huampaní, Peru, 10–15 August 1997; Second Mini World Summit, Dakar, Senegal, 1–4 March 1998; Fifth Latin American and Caribbean Meeting, Lima, Peru, 6–9 August 1997; Sixth Latin American Meeting, La Asunción, Paraguay, 12–18 August 2001; First African Meeting, Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire, 18–23 July 1994; Second African Meeting, Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire, 30 October–3 November 1995; Third African Meeting, Ouagadougou,

Burkina Faso, 14–20 October 1996; Fourth African Meeting, Popenguine, Senegal, 17–27 February 1998; Fifth African Meeting, Bamako, Mali, 31 October–14 November 2000. Former Latin American meetings are documented in Schibotto (1990) and Liebel (1994), with special references to Peru, Brazil and Nicaragua.

2. References to the organized actions of working children in other Asian countries (Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand and Indonesia) are to be found in Camacho (1999), IWGCL (1998) and Boyden et al. (1998).

3. Some organizations – such as the National Movement of Street Children in Brazil and the groups affiliated to the Global March against Child Labour – demand the complete and unconditional elimination of child labour. However, these organizations and groups are dominated and led mostly by adults. The Global March was only a temporary mobilization with the limited aim of influencing the text in the ILO Convention No. 182 about the worst forms of child labour (agreed in June 1999).

4. In the West, too, there have been various trends and social movements that have tackled the purely individualist view of the subject. However, up to now they have still not gained an understanding of the *child* as ‘social subject’ with the capacity of protagonism (see Cussiánovich, 2001b; Liebel, 2001a: 297–311; 2001f).

5. This understanding of participation is more than ‘giving the working children a voice’, as demanded by some NGOs. Whoever takes a closer look at the statements of working children’s organizations will realize that they do not at all ‘isolate the issue of child labour from the wider social setting’, as feared by Lavalette (1999: 13).

6. IWGCL (1998: 62) reports on an organization of ‘parking boys’ in Zimbabwe.

7. ‘Adults, however well intentioned they may be, cannot unquestionably identify what is good and bad about employment, as seen from the child’s point of view. This is not to say that children always “know best” any more than adults always “know best”. Rather, it is to say that the views of children are a necessary component of anything that claims to give a full account of child labour in all of its forms and with all of its implications’ (IWGCL, 1998: 44).

8. Their meaning for working children is not impaired by the fact that children’s movements are always in danger of failing in capitalist terms or of being instrumentalized as cheap and useful solutions for social problems for which the state or society in general should be responsible. Usually, children’s organizations are aware of these problems and try to tackle them.

9. It would be worth looking at the extent to which these are comparable to the tasks and social role of the ‘autonomic children’s groups’, which are nothing unusual to many Native Indian, African and South Pacific peoples in rural regions (see Ortiz Rescaniere, 1994; Weiss, 1993).

## References

- Bonnet, Michel (1999) *Le Travail des enfants: terrain de luttes*. Lausanne: Editions Page deux.
- Boyden, Jo, Birgitta Ling and William Myers (1998) *What Works for Working Children*. Stockholm: Rädda Barnen/UNICEF.
- Camacho, Agnes Zenaida V. (1999) ‘The State Generated Child Labour. Rethinking Child Work in the Philippines’, IREWOC Workshop, Amsterdam, 15–17 November (mimeo).
- Coly, Hamidou (2001) ‘An Animator’s Personal Experience’, *Voice of Working Children*, pp. 128–47. Dakar: ENDA.
- Cussiánovich, Alejandro (2001a) ‘Some Premises for Reflection and Social Practices with Working Children and Adolescents’, in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children’s Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 103–32. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).

- Cussiánovich, Alejandro (2001b) 'The Paradigm of Integral Protagonism Promotion', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 309–19. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- ENDA Jeunesse Action (ed.) (1997) 'Working Children and Youth of West Africa Get Organised', Dakar: ENDA (mimeo).
- Figuroa, Elvira and Alejandro Cussiánovich (2001) 'La organización: Espacio de resiliencia y herramienta para el protagonismo de los NATs', *NATs – Revista Internacional desde los Niños y Adolescentes Trabajadores* 5(7–8): 11–32.
- Grillo, Gemma and Giangi Schibotto (eds) (1992) '*. . . y trabajan en todas las edades . . .*' *Testimonios de niños trabajadores de América Latina*. Lima: MANTHOC.
- Ifejant (ed.) (1996) *Niños Trabajadores. Protagonismo y Actoría Social*. Lima: Instituto de Formación para Educadores de Jóvenes, Adolescentes y Niños Trabajadores de América Latina y el Caribe 'Mons. German Schmitz'.
- Ifejant (ed.) (1997) *Jóvenes y Niños Trabajadores: Sujetos Sociales. Ser Protagonistas*. Lima: Instituto de Formación para Educadores de Jóvenes, Adolescentes y Niños Trabajadores de América Latina y el Caribe 'Mons. German Schmitz'.
- Ifejant (ed.) (1998) *Niñ@s Trabajadores. Protagonismo y Actoría Social*. Lima: Instituto de Formación para Educadores de Jóvenes, Adolescentes y Niños Trabajadores de América Latina y el Caribe 'Mons. German Schmitz'.
- IWGCL (International Working Group on Child Labour) (1997) 'Have We Asked the Children?', Discussion Paper. Amsterdam: IWGCL.
- IWGCL (International Working Group on Child Labour) (1998) *Working Children: Reconsidering the Debates. Report of the International Working Group on Child Labour*. Amsterdam: Defence for Children International.
- Lavalette, Michael (ed.) (1999) *A Thing of the Past? Child Labour in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Liebel, Manfred (1994) *Protagonismo Infantil. Movimientos de Niños Trabajadores en América Latina*. Managua: Ed. Nueva Nicaragua.
- Liebel, Manfred (1996) *Somos NATRAS. Testimonios de Niños Trabajadores de Nicaragua*. Managua: Ed. Nueva Nicaragua.
- Liebel, Manfred (2000) *La Otra Infancia. Niñez Trabajadora y Acción Social*. Lima: Ed. Ifejant.
- Liebel, Manfred (2001a) *Kindheit und Arbeit. Wege zum besseren Verständnis arbeitender Kinder in verschiedenen Kulturen und Kontinenten*. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO.
- Liebel, Manfred (2001b) 'The Dignity of the Working Child: What Children in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala Think about their Work', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 53–66. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- Liebel, Manfred (2001c) '12 Rights, and Making their Own Way. The Working Youth of Africa Organise Themselves', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 197–217. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- Liebel, Manfred (2001d) 'Strengthen Children's Rights! Approaches to Participation by Working Children', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 171–80. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).

- Liebel, Manfred (2001e) 'A Right to Work for Children? Experiences from the Third World for the First World', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 221–31. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- Liebel, Manfred (2001f) 'Working children's Protagonism, Children's Rights and the Outline of a Different Childhood', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 321–48. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- Liebel, Manfred, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) (2001) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- Madörin, Kurt (1999) 'Positionspapier: Warum eine Waisenorganisation?' (unpublished paper). Terre des Hommes, Basle.
- Miljesteig, Per (2000) *Creating Partnerships With Working Children and Youth. Report for the World Bank*, Washington DC: World Bank; available at: [wbln0018.worldbank.org/HDNet/HDdocs.nsf/2d5135ecbf351de6852566a90069b8b6/4714e9db6fbf38db8525695100587e71/\\$FILE/0021.pdf](http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/HDNet/HDdocs.nsf/2d5135ecbf351de6852566a90069b8b6/4714e9db6fbf38db8525695100587e71/$FILE/0021.pdf)
- Molina Barrios, Ramiro and Rafael Rojas Lizarazu (1995) *La niñez campesina. Uso del tiempo y vida cotidiana*. La Paz: UNICEF.
- Ortiz Rescaniere, Alejandro (1994) *Un Estudio sobre los Grupos Autónomos De Niños a partir de un trabajo de campo en Champacchocha, Andahuaylan*. Lima: Fundación Bernhard van Leer/Ministerio de Educación.
- Overwien, Bernd (2000) 'Informal Learning and the Role of Social Movements', *International Review of Education* 46(6): 621–40.
- Salazar, María Cristina (1995) 'The Social Significance of Children's and Adolescent's Work in Latin America and the Caribbean', *Children's Work. To Be or Not to Be*, pp. 61–85. Lima: Rádda Barnen.
- Sanz, Andrés (1997) 'From Kundapur to Geneva: The International Coordination of Working Children', *NATs – Working Children and Adolescents International Review* 3(3–4): 11–24.
- Schibotto, Giangi (1990) *Niños Trabajadores. Construyendo una identidad*. Lima: MAN-THOC.
- Schibotto, Giangi (2001) 'Social Action with Working Children and Adolescents: From Empirical Description to Theoretical Models', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 271–88. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- Swift, Anthony (1999) *Working Children Get Organised*. London: Save the Children.
- Swift Anthony (2001) 'India – Tale of Two Working Children's Unions', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 181–96. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- Terenzio, Fabrizio (2001) 'From Projects for Children via Projects with Children to Children's Trade Unions. Description of a Development in Africa', in Manfred Liebel, Bernd Overwien and Albert Recknagel (eds) *Working Children's Protagonism: Social Movements and Empowerment in Latin America, Africa and India*, pp. 289–94. Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO (Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation).
- Tolfree, David (1998) *Old Enough to Work, Old Enough to Have a Say. Different Approaches to Supporting Working Children*. Stockholm: Rádda Barnen.

- Touraine, Alain (1995) *Critique of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Touré, Marema (1998) 'A Case Study of the Work of ENDA in Senegal in Supporting the Association of Child and Young Workers', in David Tolfree (ed.) *Old Enough to Work, Old Enough to Have a Say. Different Approaches to Supporting Working Children*, pp. 179–200. Stockholm: Rädda Barnen.
- Van de Loo, Marie-José and Margarete Reinhart (eds) (1993) *Kinder. Ethnologische Forschungen in fünf Kontinenten*. Munich: Trickster.
- Voice of African Children* (2001) Occasional Papers No. 217. Dakar: ENDA.
- Weiss, Florence (1993) 'Von der Schwierigkeit, über Kinder zu forschen. Die Iatmul in Papua-Neuguinea', in Marie-José van de Loo and Margarete Reinhart (eds) *Kinder. Ethnologische Forschungen in fünf Kontinenten*, pp. 96–153. Munich: Trickster.

