

Advancing the participatory rights of Haitian children and youth in the context of migration

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Young Haitians who wish to leave their environment to go to Port-au-Prince or further afield should be supported in their endeavour and helped in their choice. Reversing the “protective” and “incapacitating” perspective, the author argues for humanitarian actors taking into consideration the voices and aspirations of young people.

The inextricable interconnection between the concepts of “child” and “young person” and the effective rights of “children” and “young people” significantly impacts the ability of each to participate in the world around them. It is the conceptualisation of the child as a rights-bearing rather than a needs-bearing individual, entrenched in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that affirms among many essential rights, a child’s right to be heard.¹ Despite widespread support for the UNCRC, the degree to which children’s right to participation is upheld remains limited. As a collective entity, this can be attributed to the marginal status children and youth occupy *vis-à-vis* adults, a status that is not immune from the influence of the cliché of the childhood icon.

As a signatory to the UNCRC, the Haitian government is legally bound to uphold the rights of children and youth. As the country experiences a myriad of humanitarian issues, a considerable number of humanitarian actors are present with the task of supporting the Haitian state to fulfil its obligations to its youngest citizens.² Haiti is therefore an appropriate setting in which to examine children and youth participation in humanitarian affairs.

While it is abundantly clear that humanitarian work requires decisive action, the need to take a holistic approach to the rights of children and youth is very important. For instance, the Three Ps in the UNCRC – Protection, Provision, and Participation – are supposed to be given equal weight in promoting and upholding the rights of children and youth. However, it is often the very first P, along with the second P, that take priority at the expense of the third P.³ This is evident in humanitarian programming and can be put down to the child cliché which is an obstacle to balancing the constraints on, and possibilities for, children’s agency.

This state of affairs may therefore warrant a critical examination of child and youth participation in humanitarian programming in Haiti. Guided by Leena Alanen’s theory of “generationing” – the process by which power asymmetries situate degrees of agency that are elevated based on the

¹ UN Commission on Human Rights, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

² Jonathan M. Katz, *The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

³ Didier Reynaert *et al.*, “Introduction: a critical approach to children’s rights”, in W. Vandenhoe *et al.* (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Children’s Rights Studies*, Routledge, 2015, p. 6.

identity of adult and limited based on the identity of child⁴ –, this article will reveal the problematic perpetuation of the child cliché while in turn facilitating possibilities for children and youth participation in humanitarian affairs. By challenging the problematic victim/wayward dichotomy as viewed through a traditional humanitarian lens,⁵ we aim to promote a nuanced understanding of children and youth by exploring the multitude of ways in which they participate in and are impacted by humanitarian action. Such a dialogical approach may contribute to advancing the participatory rights of Haitian children and youth in a migration context.

The historical and contemporary political economy of Haiti

A precise examination into how the cliché of the childhood icon can shape humanitarian programming in Haiti requires placing such discussions within the historical and contemporary political economy of the country. The French colonial structure imposed a political mandate of slavery and the economic plantation system on Haiti. In so doing, it generated wealth through an authoritarian governance structure.⁶ Despite the ebbs and flows of citizen resistance and State repression over time, the vestiges of colonialism have remained. This is demonstrated by both international and national elites continuing to utilise the power of the State to accumulate wealth at the expense of the citizenry.⁷ Such alliances have produced a political economy where 60% of the population lives in poverty while the richest 20% of the population possess 64% of the country's total wealth and the poorest 20% of the population possess less than 1%.⁸ The reality of Haiti's political and economic structures give rise to very real obstacles to Haitian children and youth exercising their rights. While the child cliché can certainly draw important attention to the difficulties encountered by Haitian children in securing their basic rights to health, education, and protection, it is not unreasonable to suggest that it may generate a fixed conceptualisation of childhood; one that is experiencing perpetual victimisation and in need of adult intervention. This conceptualisation can limit the agency that Haitian children may exercise to find solutions to the structural injustices they face.

Generationing and the cliché of the childhood icon

The permanence with which particular norms, values and principles construct the cliché of the childhood icon may share conceptual space with the idealised vision of the child espoused by the UNCRC. While the UNCRC importantly promotes the child as an independent-rights bearer, it runs up against the reality of interdependent-rights bearers that many children of the majority world, including the children of Haiti, are accustomed to. Therefore, implementation of Leena Alanen's theory of generationing can challenge the static nature inherent in both the child cliché as well as the minority world interpretations of the UNCRC and replace them with a dynamic theoretical framework capable of more precisely capturing the realities of Haitian children's agency. This can be done by identifying how generational relations materialise through the assigning of norms to adults and children that ultimately shape the extent to

⁴ Leena Alanen, "Generational order." in Jens Qvortrup, W. Corsaro and M. Honig (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 159–174.

⁵ Bina d'Costa et al., "Introduction: Why children matter to global conflict." in Bina d'Costa et al. (eds), *Children and Global Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 1–8, https://assets.cambridge.org/97811070/38844/excerpt/9781107038844_excerpt.pdf

⁶ Robert Fatton Jr., *The Roots of Haitian Despotism*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007, p. vii.

⁷ For an in-depth history of Haiti, see Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*, Metropolitan Books, 2012.

⁸ The World Bank, *The World Bank in Haiti: Overview*, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/haiti/overview#1>

which children may participate in the world around them.⁹ Such understanding therefore emerges by moving beyond the child cliché in humanitarianism that conceptualises the children of Haiti as “children-out-of-bounds”¹⁰ and halting the “salvatory enterprise”¹¹ that far too frequently informs humanitarian organisational principles. The magnitude of this conceptual shift in analysing children and youth agency in humanitarian affairs simultaneously elevates the latter to stakeholder status and therefore facilitates their active participation with humanitarian workers. This importantly aligns with the call by Graça Machel, a United Nations expert on the impact of armed conflict on children, that “young people should be seen... as survivors and active participants in creating solutions, not just as victims or problems.”¹² This is clearly articulated in General comment no. 12, article 121, where children are acknowledged as having a key role in their own protection.¹³ Guided by this participatory position on children and youth in humanitarian affairs, the paper now examines child protection practices in the context of children and youth migration in Haiti. To do so, it is informed by qualitative interviews with members of the child protection community in Haiti where, as the researcher, I did not seek to “mine” information from, but rather “travel” with, the respondents¹⁴ in order to understand how they arrive at and share their unique perspective. The findings reveal the value that an agent-based approach provides in contrast to the singular narrative that the cliché of the childhood icon is confined to.

The issue of migration among Haitian children and youth

The political economy of Haiti in which international and national elites utilise the State to generate wealth at the expense of the citizenry has created a considerable urban-rural divide. Public goods that all Haitian citizens are entitled to remain largely unavailable to the rural population.¹⁵ In such circumstances, “young people feel that they are leaving nothing behind, [and therefore] the opportunity costs of migrating are considered to be very low.”¹⁶ But for one Haitian child protection officer who grew up in the rural areas of Haiti and now works for an international non-governmental organisation, “the living conditions in the country-side are very, very hard. [But] once you go to Port-au-Prince, you have to pay for everything [and therefore they feel] people don’t have the information to make a balanced decision. Without informing [children and their families] of this [reality], the child will move to the city.”¹⁷ In this light, child protection workers are very cognizant of the drive to migrate that Haitian children and youth possess. The question becomes one of ensuring an informed choice is made.

⁹ Leena Alanen, “Visions of a social theory of childhood”, *Childhood*, vol. 7, no. 4, November 2000, pp. 493–505.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Chin, “Children out of bounds in globalizing times”, *Postcolonial Studies*, no. 6, vol. 3, 2003, pp. 309–325 (p. 312).

¹¹ Diane Hoffman, “Saving children, saving Haiti? Child vulnerability and narratives of the nation”, *Childhood*, no. 19, vol. 2, 2011, pp. 155–168 (p. 157).

¹² United Nations Children’s Fund, *Machel Study 10 Year Strategic Review: Children and Conflict in a Changing World*, April 2009, p. 4.

¹³ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, “General comment No. 12: the right of the child to be heard”, 2009, art. 121, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ae562c52.html>

¹⁴ Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Sage Publications, 2nd ed., 2009.

¹⁵ Dorte Verner and Alessandra Heinemann, “Social resilience and fragility in Haiti: breaking the conflict-poverty trap”, *en breve*, World’s Bank Latin America and Caribbean Region, no. 94, September 2006, p. 2, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/10311/380140ENGLISH0HIOEn0breve09401PUBLIC1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹⁶ Henriette Lunde (ed.), *Haiti youth survey 2009. Volume II: analytical report*, Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies, 2010, pp. 31–32, https://www.academia.edu/8539888/Haiti_Youth_Survey_2009_volume_II_Analytical_Report

¹⁷ Haitian child protection officer, personal interview, 2013.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Since the experiences of Haiti's migrant children and youth can vary significantly, it is vital that child protection workers monitor the well-being of these children. In instances where children and youth have had a negative experience and require the support of humanitarian workers, one international child protection officer explains that return and reintegration policies require a "pre-return risk assessment, an income generating activity, as well as monitoring and evaluation."¹⁸ For them, it is the income generating activity that proves most crucial as "the root cause of children migrating is that families do not feel they have enough. If we do not give them new skills and a new outlook to change their material situation, we're going to have the same result."¹⁹ To make this activity a success, consultation with children and youth is certainly required to ensure their well-being is protected.

In navigating the migration experiences of Haitian children and youth as a whole, there is a growing recognition among child protection workers of their decision-making capacity. This can be seen both in the drive to migrate as well as the situations where migration does not lead to the desired outcomes, in the return and reintegration process. Increased acknowledgement that children and youth must participate in humanitarian affairs is therefore essential to improving the state of children's rights. This increasingly nuanced perspective is perhaps best captured by the director of a leading international children's rights organisation who states,

"For [our team], it's really important because we won't be able, I mean, I assume we won't be able and we should not aim at stopping children from moving because ... it's opportunities. But what we want to identify are the risks that children are facing along this road. When are the instances where children are likely to be abused/exploited in order to put in place or to design prevention mechanism and to protect children who have to move and who are going through, trying to accompany them so that at the end of the road, they have positive opportunities only. We will try to keep [children] home if they want to, if the family wants to keep them which I'm sure they do. So, let's try to keep their children with them and accompany those who have to go."²⁰

Consequently, this dialogical approach to Haitian children and youth migrants has meant the practices of child protection workers are better informed in pursuit of the ultimate goal of enhancing the rights of Haitian children and youth.

In closing, it is evident that the cliché of the childhood icon in humanitarian affairs offers one narrative of children and youth experiences. While this conceptualisation can draw important attention to the significant difficulties that children and youth face, it fails to contextualise the uniqueness of the reality experienced by each individual. In this manner, Leena Alanen's theory of generationing critiques the problematic permanence of adults and children in a top-down relationship that pushes children and youth agency to the margins. Instead, to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of children and youth in humanitarian affairs in general, and the experiences of Haitian children and youth migrants in this specific instance, their participatory potential must be acknowledged. Such a transformation in the norms and values governing adults and children can better support a dialogical relationship between child protection workers and the children and youth of Haiti. Since this reality remains out of reach when operating within the cliché of the childhood icon, this paper demonstrates the importance of stepping outside the paradigm. In so doing, it reveals the essential role that children and youth participation plays in upholding the rights of Haitian children and youth with respect to the issue of migration.

¹⁸ International child protection officer, personal interview, 2013.

¹⁹ *Idem*.

²⁰ Director of an international children's protection organisation, personal interview, 2013.

Biography

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