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A Plea for Participatory Ethics and Knowledge Production with Children in Africa

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Summary

This policy brief draws on aspects of participatory research and the ethical challenges that surround it. It explores knowledge co-creation and ethics in participatory research with children in Africa. The focus on participatory ethics is justified by the fact that it constituted some of the core features of the 2017 Child and Youth Institute. The policy brief discusses the practice of participatory research informed by the paradigm of Right to be Properly Researched (henceforth, RPR). It highlights the transformative potential of participatory ethics for undertaking collaborative, ethical research with children. In so doing, it argues for the importance of advocacy for/with/by children as well as the value of capacity building in order to promote research that respects children's dignity and produces positive social change in Africa.

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Background

This policy brief reflects some of the discussions and debates during the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa's (CODESRIA) annual Child and Youth Institute that was held in Dakar, Senegal (September 25–October 6, 2017). The Institute focused on the timely topic of African Futures and the Futures of Childhood in Africa. It engaged with the interface between future aspirations of children and versions of African futures to develop insights into how children are both living embodiments of history and prospective agents of social change in African communities. Its point of departure was the idea that children's ideas about their future are important for their present actions. Based on the research of laureates, the institute elucidated that children's individual aspirations not only reflect collective expectations but also inform and are informed by ideas about contingency of development.

The institute promoted interdisciplinary perspectives across linguistic boundaries – participants from both Anglophone and Francophone Africa debated on the relationship between development processes and young African's present and future lives. Temporality and future orientations were key markers of the institute. The laureates looked at the diversity of children who come of age in diverse African contexts and linked that with the ways in which communities experience social transformation. They also explored the role of children in producing social change and how social change reconfigures children's generational positions and futures. A total of 11 laureates presented their research from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Benin, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. The institute organized a roundtable discussion on research-policy nexus whereby four panellists (Dr. Mélanie Jacquemin, Dr. Thierno Souleymane Barry, Mr. Ian Hopwood, and Dr. Divine Fuh) discussed the complex terrains of research, publishing, and dissemination of research findings about/on/with children in Africa.

Knowledge production about African children is often compounded by lack of meaningful research relations that place children's dignity at its core. A good deal of knowledge about African children is also generated in response to the need for reporting and monitoring of children's rights, a popular albeit western concept. In addition, a large body of literature that reports on African children is characterised by dysfunction and pathology. 'Crisis childhoods' like child soldiering, AIDS orphanhood, child trafficking or street children abounds descriptions of projects for funding and justification on gaps in knowledge or research needs on African children's lives. This challenge partly emanates from and reflects the history and politics of knowledge production. The lens used in viewing

children's life worlds not only shape how knowledge about them is created but also the ways in which research results are deployed, informing policymaking and programming. In this sense, knowledge about African children are rarely situated in the social, cultural and material realities in which boys and girls grow up. The socio-cultural realities of families and communities frames the values and valuations of childhood and, hence, constitutive of how knowledge about them is negotiated.

Yet, the idea that children are capable of participating in research, including as researchers, is being recognised in Africa. Educational and research institutions as well as NGOs continue to shape the notion that children form a social category different from adults and, as such, hold distinct perspectives. However, the paradox is that these recognitions have created a critical disjuncture between on the one hand acknowledging children's rights to participate in complex research practices and, on the other hand, the belief that issues affecting children are inseparable from, and need to be studied as part of the wider society within which they are embedded. This paradox is also telling because when children are given the opportunity, they often express keen interest in and ownership of the knowledge they coproduce with adult researchers[1].

This policy brief explores knowledge production among children[2], African children in particular, with an emphasis on an ethics of engagement in participatory research. It highlights the transformative potential of participatory ethics, and the ethical and moral considerations in the practice of collaborative research involving children. The policy brief also identifies and engages with how ideas of children's rights predicated in local values and grassroots activism can be mobilised to support arguments for co-production of knowledge, policy-making, and advocacy with children. A call is made for stakeholders to respond to issues affecting African children's lives through participatory research that is both ethical and respectful of children's humanness.

An added goal of the policy brief is to strengthen participatory research with children in Africa. It is written for researchers, policy-makers, program planners, and advocates who value participatory research for the future, for children's lives, and for respecting children's rights. Research is conceptualised as a process of systematising complex sets of information for explaining social reality. It involves production of new knowledge, narratives, visions, and version of/for the future.

In the following sections, I first highlight the importance of coproduction and exchange of knowledge about children's lives. Then, I engage with how ideas of children's rights can be mobilized to promote participatory research and participatory ethics. Lastly, I discuss the implications of ethics for research spaces, relationships, and expectations.

Ethics of Engagement in Child Research

Ethics of engagement refers to how researchers relate ethically to the world they study. It refers to the ways in which researchers respond to social and ethical dilemmas that emerge in the everyday life of research and fieldwork. Ethics of engagement in participatory research includes a) how to produce research-based knowledge with children, b) how to respect children in the research process, c) how to negotiate the real-world practice of ethics, and d) how to redefine ethics collaboratively with children. These points are elaborated below.

Knowledge Production with Children

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (henceforth, UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (henceforth, ACRWC) mirror the recognition within international policy-making that children are social actors. This recognition – coupled with insights from childhood studies that children have valid experiences and perspectives – has important methodological implications. They entail the capacity of, and the need to involve, children in research about their lives. Children have the skills to take part in research that traces their past but also projects them to the future. Participatory research with African children show that they have unique perspectives that are different from adults. As holders of views and opinions, children can tell us a great deal about their lived experiences. They are also commentators about the societies they live in.

For child researchers, generating evidence-based knowledge is crucial, although it is only part of the work that they do. An equally important task is how they leverage research findings to advocate and inform action for improvement of children's lives. Academic knowledge should be seen as public knowledge that needs to be made accessible for the good of the collective. The assumption commonly held among academics and practitioners that academics are "producers" of knowledge and policy-makers are "users" of that knowledge is problematic, not the least because knowledge production is an interdependent process. However, this assumption has contributed to the "rift" that exists between these two communities of practice. Arguably, knowledge production for/with/by children should be central to improving their present and future lives. To that end, children can be empowered to participate in any research at any stage.

Often times, academics, NGOs, policy-makers, and planners work separately. They also produce knowledge about African children independently. One of the concerns that transpired from the Institute was that academics and

policy-actors might be studying similar problems facing children without speaking to each other. An excellent example for this is the topic of children's participation rights, especially the differentiated understandings and interpretations around these rights. The common criticism within academia is that the language of universal rights of the child is foreign to African cultures and realities. Children in Africa do not imagine their futures independently of their families and communities. While this is accepted as a valid point by academics, what is at stake here is not whether children should have individual rights different from adults. Nor do I want to suggest a disengagement from discourses of children's rights. Key questions are whose definitions of rights are we talking about? How are African children's rights conceptualized culturally? Can local ideas of rights be used to promote collaborative research with children? These questions have applications for the practice of research and children's involvement in knowledge production.

Another key issue that emerged from the Institute, which highlight the plight of African children in research, is the ways in which knowledge about them is exploitative. Even when children are recognised as knowledgeable human beings, they are seen as sources of data rather than owners of the knowledge that is generated. This concern speaks to some of the critical questions that indigenous communities and African scholars often ask, that reveals the significance of decolonizing methodologies and research relations with human subjects, including children (see the section on 'Participatory Ethics').

The ACRWC adopted by African governments situates children's rights in local social, cultural, economic, and political contexts of the continent. Article 31 of ACRWC's focus on responsibility is a useful correction to the individual notion of rights promoted by the UNCRC. There is a need to mobilize local interpretations of rights and participation to advocate for research and practice that benefits the well-being of children in Africa. There is also a need for an understanding of children's rights that brings into play untapped possibilities for community building. This requires dialogue between not just academics and policy-makers but also with local communities and, not the least, children themselves. These stakeholders – or communities of practice – must work together in the identification of problems and their solutions by going beyond universal rights. Furthermore, they should redefine these rights from children and community's points of view. This transformation moves children's rights from adult-oriented proclamations veiled in Western ideology to a form of grassroots activism couched in children's ideals and conceptualizations. The importance of African children's engagement in practices and actions undertaken by people and institutions concerning issues that affect them cannot be overemphasized.

Engaged scholarship suggests communicating and advocating for policy uptake so that research outcomes can contribute to social justice. Research is a public service that requires an understanding of both key decisions that policy-actors make and policy-making processes. There is also a need for leveraging evidence-based knowledge-researchers need to undertake studies that are informed by and can in turn inform policies. Similarly, public servants have a duty to engage with multiple levels of society, including academics and other stakeholders. This collaboration between academia and policy and planning is important because who produces knowledge about children, how the knowledge is produced, and for whom it is produced is as important as the knowledge itself. Additionally, knowledge production presupposes training and capacity building in methods, research relations, and dissemination and advocacy strategies (e.g. lobbying, raising public awareness, campaigning). There is a critical shortage of professionals in these areas in Africa today.

Right to Be Properly Researched

The paradigm of the Right to be Properly Researched (RPR)[3] is a fairly new way of thinking and talking about the human rights of children, and how that can be translated into research practice and advocacy. At the core of the RPR are three issues[4]: First, it is about research *methods* that are respectful of children's rights and competencies. Second, it focuses on research *processes* that are ethical and emancipatory. Third, it engages with research *outcomes* that do not harm children (this includes questions of representation but also wider issues of dissemination, advocacy, and ownership of research to which I will return later).

The RPR focuses on the interface between methods and ethics. It entails methodological innovations in order to circumvent ethical dilemmas. This builds on the conviction that methods need to be found, piloted, and adapted before they are used. Participatory approaches in which children are given the opportunity to not only partake but also determine what methods of research are used enables researchers to access their knowledge. RPR thus has great potential for transforming research by incorporating in research design indigenous ways of collecting, storing, and transmitting local knowledge (e.g. oral tradition, folklore, proverbs, music, etc.) on/about/with/by children. This is useful because children can participate in research in ways they find comfortable while the methods used will protect them and minimize risk for themselves and the research team.

An important advantage of participatory approaches is that ethical issues are considered at the outset of the research so that they are accommodated in the resource planning, budget, and timeline[5]. Ethical considerations are

ongoing throughout the research. Ethical dilemmas can also be mitigated by good research design in which methods that are suitable and appropriate for exploring certain topics are chosen. In elaborating the interrelated features of methodology and ethics, RPR underscores the roles and responsibilities of researchers as well as the educational and research institutions that provide training in these areas.

The RPR does not imply that all children should have a right to be researched. However, it does suggest that all children who participate in research should have their human rights respected[6]. This means that children's involvement in detailed research process – from inception of a project through data collection, interpretation, dissemination of findings, and advocacy – is informed by an ethic of care whereby children are not exploited.

Living Ethics

Linked to the above is the practice of ethics in participatory research. Fluehr-Lobban defines ethics as "a system of moral principles, the rules of conduct, associated with human actions described as right or wrong, good or bad"[7]. Actions and behaviors of researchers are complex terrains of contestation. They have far-reaching consequences – particularly when children are involved as participants. Participatory research with children has gained momentum in the past decade, and children are no longer seen as mere objects but instead participants in research – knowledgeable human beings – who can co-construct knowledge along with adult researchers. Collaborative research has consequences for the meaning of research: not just for the ways in which knowledge is created and shared but also how it is appropriated and enacted by stakeholders. It also has the potential to transform research practice; including ethical codes of conduct and research relationships.

A respectful relationship is at the core of ethical research. This calls for ethical sensitivity i.e., the capacity of researchers to be conscious of, and be accountable to, their actions. As a principle of "basic ethics," reflexivity is what really counts in research with human beings. It is "both a skill and a virtue" – a process through which tacit knowledge might be rendered explicit and subsequently shared[8]. Reflexivity affords researchers to be alert to new, context-specific social, moral, economic, cultural, psychological, and emotional challenges that the research environment reveals.

Reflexivity and ethics are inseparable. To elaborate this interface, I explore the difference between institutional ethics on the one hand and everyday ethics, or "living ethics" on the other. In this context, living ethics refers to the messy and real-world experience of research. It is also a space for encounter that creates possibilities for negotiations whereby, for example, children can "have a say" about research before, during and after fieldwork. Since

children know a great deal about their lives and can participate in detailed research processes, it is important to translate that into an ethics of engagement whereby the values and ideas that they bring to the practice of research are taken seriously. This is often an overlooked point in child research ethics. For example, the advice of institutional ethics espoused by the Institutional Review Board on consent and principle of do no harm tends to both depoliticize and decontextualize the researched (in terms of age, gender, social class, privilege, status, power, etc.). It also falls short of reflecting on the diversity of actors (including multiple layers of gatekeepers) who participate in research and who have wide-ranging expectations regarding the research process and outcome. Another example is informed consent in research. To seek informed consent from children is a norm rather than the exception, although in many African contexts children see themselves and are seen by their societies as members of the wider family collective. This has implications for the significance of engaging all 'stakeholders' in research. In rural African communities, children may not also be always literate or able participate in a research practice if the methods used are not appropriate to their knowledge, skills and interests.

Living ethics departs from the orderly rules of institutional ethics. Institutional ethics refers to what research relationships with children *should be* whereas living ethics refers to what research relationships with children *can be*[9]. The former is prescriptive while the latter is pragmatic and imaginative. Institutional ethics is about protection, while lived ethics is about contestation: In lived ethics, ethics is a practice that is situated in places, cultures, and relationships and in ways that values and respects children[10].

Participatory Ethics

As noted above, institutional ethics are reworked through research. The potential of participatory ethics lies in the space that it opens for a collaborative definition of research relationships. In child research, there is often a disconnect between how researchers acknowledge children's competence in participatory methods on the one hand, and the protectionism that exists when it comes to allowing them to define the space of ethics and research itself, on the other. Through addressing how there is *power* imbalance in participation, participatory researchers "hand over the stick" to the researched. In this way, participation remedies the common problem whereby children are seen as mere sources of empirical data and from whom knowledge is extracted, with them benefiting little or nothing in return. Research can indeed exploit people, their cultures, their knowledge, and their resources[11]. Exploitation through research takes different forms. It is not uncommon to witness "African children's voices" being used to justify a cause that they may not be aware of or support. Poor children and their

families may spend lengthy hours doing surveys with little input from them and little feedback on the results. The knowledge of children is also often misrepresented or is unacknowledged in publications. Information taken from African children and their communities is published in Western journals and books that they and their communities neither read nor have access to. These challenges highlight the importance of collaborative fieldwork that builds on local perception of research, research relationships, and expectations rather than a top-down approach where the "rules of engagement" are imposed from outside.

Participatory ethics is also about attending to the material, social, and political realities of children. It is about addressing concerns of injustice that one stumbles upon or experiences in the research process. Researchers undertaking participatory fieldwork in Africa are, for example, confronted with and often unprepared for overcoming issues that are personal and political. Participatory research with children suggests that *participating* in their lives is an unavoidable part of the process. Scheper-Hughes[12] argues that politically and morally engaged research requires its practitioners to be "witnesses" instead of "spectators." She suggests that if researchers deny themselves the power to identify an ill or a wrong and choose to ignore the extent to which people experience suffering, they collaborate with the relations of power that allow the suffering to continue. In this sense, ethics of engagement implies a commitment to advocate for those whose voices are not heard or for those who are oppressed.

Participatory ethics does not mean a "child influenced relativism" that rejects ethical standards. Nor does it suggest a focus on certain groups of children who might impose (or protect) their privileged positions in research. Participatory ethics calls forth a radical interpretation of ethics in an attempt to bridge the gap between institutional ethics and actual ethical practices. It enforces an understanding of accountability in ethics – a bottom up approach in ethics – whereby researchers are accountable to and hand over ethical frames to research participants[13]. This is necessary because it encourages rather than restricts collaborative research with children and, for that matter, with anyone who has a stake in childhood. In this sense, participatory ethics contributes to positive social change in issues identified by the collective.

The practice of collaborative research with children raises several additional ethical challenges. These include, for example, harm reduction, representation, and ownership of research outcomes. In participatory ethics researchers ask *how* it is possible to do no harm, and which set of actions contains the least risk of doing harm?[14] Harm reduction is comprised of four interrelated dimensions. First, it implies the need for foresight and

imagination of researchers to envision how children may best be *prevented from harm* (both anticipated and non-anticipated). Second, it means that research results should be *free from harm*. Third, it implies that research results should *reduce harm* and vulnerability. Finally, it implies that research helps achieve social justice for and with children. Yet, in practice, both harm reduction and prevention from harm are far from straightforward. For example, researchers cannot know or ascertain whether the result of their study is harmful or not. The potential of participatory ethics thus lies in the space it opens to design research collaboratively with children and adult stakeholders in ways that *potential harm* is minimized. In participatory ethics, this also means putting in place strategies in order to mitigate harm so that unintended outcomes from the implementation of research are monitored continuously.

In conclusion, I note that ethics of engagement in participatory research with children in Africa can be sharpened by the following set of questions.

Some Checklists for Participatory Ethics
• Whose interest does the research serve? • Whose ethics do researchers promote in a research process? • How can researchers avoid transgressing values, customs, and desires of local populations? • How can children be stakeholders in research? • How can children inform researchers about ethics (e.g., informed consent) and research relations? • What does it mean to consent for a particular research study in terms of ownership of the research outcome? • Do child participants have the moral right to be recognized as sources of information and accrue any benefit coming out of the research? • How can researchers ensure that the stories and narratives that children choose to share with them actually belong to the children themselves? • Is it ethical to research suffering and poverty experienced by children and yet do nothing?

I hope that these questions provide not only the basis for researchers to reflect on ethical practices but also start a conversation on ethical codes of conduct for undertaking participatory research with children in Africa.

Recommendations

This section outlines recommendations on how policies can support participatory research and enable the exchange of knowledge and capabilities to improve children's lives in Africa.

- Capacity building on participatory research and ethical implications are crucial for respecting children in the research process. Training children and researchers in advocacy strategies is an integral part of this task. Capacity building should also be extended to policy-makers, program planners and managers – who are often unaware of the advantages and challenges of participatory research with children.

- Since existing ethical codes of conduct for research with children are developed in Western contexts, there is a need to create guidelines that reflect fieldwork contexts, and research interactions and expectations in Africa.

- Close collaboration among academics, public institutions, policy-actors, and practitioners will facilitate the production and use of evidence-based knowledge that reflects African children's lived experiences as well as improve the documentation and transmission of tacit knowledge.

- African governments need to promote the activities of research and policy organizations like CODESRIA and the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) so that enhanced collaboration among them can add value to their work of advocacy and leverage opportunities for advancing the rights and well-being of children.

- There is a need to bring together epistemic communities in African childhood studies. For example, previous participants of CODESRIA's Child and Youth Institute can, as a group of alumnae, establish a network of African child and youth researchers. It is also necessary to form communities of practice where institutions working on children issues can collaborate.

- Academics need to not only disseminate their research findings to policy-makers but also design and carry out research that is informed by global and local policy agendas, and that addresses policy relevant questions. Likewise, policy-actors and decision-makers need to facilitate collaborative, cross-sectoral research and engagement concerning children's lives.

- As the landscape of publishing and ways for disseminating research outcomes are changing rapidly, researchers need to identify approaches in which the local knowledge of children can be

shared and accessed by children. This includes not just modern technology and social media but tapping into traditional modes like music, folklore, and verbal methods by which children express their views in everyday life.

- African governments need to invest more in research and capacity building for child-focused studies, wherever possible as part of longer-term, multi-sector, and inter-disciplinary research strategies. Civil society organizations need to push governments for increased resource mobilization in order to curb dependence on donor-driven research.

- Research institutions need to explore possibilities to fund innovative research with children through grants from new actors like the private sector and African philanthropists.

Notes

1. Ennew, J., T. Abebe, R. Bangyani, P. Karapituck, A. T. Kjørholt, and T. Noonsup. 2009. *The Right to be Properly Researched: How to Do Rights-Based, Scientific Research with Children. A Set of Ten Manuals for Field Researchers*. Bangkok: Black on White Publications, Norwegian Center for Child Research and World Vision International.

2. Although the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) defines a child as 'any human being below 18 years of age' (African Union 1990), this policy brief recognizes that such a biological definition is arbitrary and does not take into account differences in gendered and cultural interpretations of when childhood starts and when it ends.

3. The RPR is attributed to the late scholar and child right activist Dr. Judith Ennew (1944-2013).

4. Ennew et al., 2009.

5. Ennew et al. 2009.

6. Abebe, T. and S. Bessell 2014. Advancing Ethical Research with Children: Critical Reflections on Ethical Guidelines, *Children's Geographies*, 12:1, 126-133.

7. Fluehr-Lobban, C. (Ed.) 1991. *Ethics and the Profession of Anthropology: Dialogue for a New Era.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

8. Ibid.

9. Cahill, C., F. Sultana, and R. Pain. 2007. Participatory Ethics: Politics, Practices and Institutions. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 6 (3): 304–318.

10. ibid

11. Smith, L. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed books: London and New York.

12. Scheper-Hughes, N. 1995. The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology, *Current Anthropology* 36: 409–20.

13. Cahill et al. 2007.

14. Cramer, C., L. Hammond, and J. Pottier (eds). 2011. *Researching Violence in Africa: Ethical and Methodological Challenges.* Leiden: Brill.

15. Cramer et al. 2011.

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