

**Rejuvenate Dialogue
15th September 2022**

Setting the scene

The sixth Rejuvenate dialogue was held on 15th September 2022. Six panellists working across contexts and themes joined the Rejuvenate team on a discussion on uncertainty and its intersection with child and youth rights and participation.

From past research, we know that young people do not necessarily view uncertainty in their lives as negative. This is especially true for some of the most-marginalised youth who see their 'certainty' as poverty, unemployment and environmental fragility. This dialogue focuses on how adults, including those working on policy and practice in rights and philanthropy, can learn from how children and youth positively navigate uncertainty. Further, this dialogue makes the case for working with children and youth if we are to find new, more hopeful futures in the face of uncertainty.

Introduction

(You can also watch the presentations: <https://youtu.be/eX6-noNW-Xc>)

Co-Director of the project, **Tessa Lewin** (Institute of Development Studies), began the dialogue by introducing the Rejuvenate project and reflecting briefly on the previous dialogues and remarking on the growing network and community of practice brought together in these spaces.

Co-Director **Vicky Johnson** (University of the Highlands and Islands) introduced the topic of uncertainty and youth. She said that although uncertainty is part of all of our lives, we have a lot to learn from how young people navigate the daily occurrence of uncertainty in their lives – from transitioning bodies and feelings to different societal expectations as they grow up. These changes are compounded by contexts of political and environmental uncertainty.

Next, **Andy West**, introduced his and Vicky Johnson's new book – Youth and Positive Uncertainty – based on research with hundreds of young people in Ethiopia and Nepal. The book is centred on the idea of uncertainty not being necessarily negative, but rather something positive for young people in difficult contexts. Even though the young people featured in the book didn't know what was going to happen they were hopeful that it would have a positive outcome.

Guest Speakers

Lucy Shuttleworth, Screenwriter and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Portsmouth, shared her experience at the Global Campus for Human Rights at the Venice Film Festival. The event was a space for human and child rights advocates, experts, academics, practitioners and lawyers to come together with film makers to explore how film can be used to create impactful social messaging on child rights while considering the ethical dilemmas that could arise around using film making to address sensitive issues. Lucy spoke briefly about the film, Innocence, which tackles the issue of forced child military service. She also highlighted the challenges associated with insider and outsider knowledge roles in storytelling spaces. Lastly, Lucy shared a short clip of festival participants

sharing their thoughts on the importance of film in this space. Several powerful quotes from interviewees include:

'Today we are so led by the visual image...this is the most powerful and impactful way to make sure that positive change happens' - Nick Danziger (photographer and film maker)

'Being able to ethically curate this content, being in contact with them, you are platforming their voices, and therefore not speaking for the children, but allowing them to tell their stories in their own way' – Elena Morresi (Multimedia Journalist)

'Film is a very important tool for advocacy considering that you get to document children's real life experiences and in that way you can be able to influence change in how children are being treated' – Opal Suwenda (child rights and welfare expert)

'Through films you can convey to broader audiences complex legal notions of child rights. So through films we can build awareness on children's rights and that makes it very easy for legislation to be implemented, or for legislation to be adopted to the government' - Kriti Patisaka (human rights lawyer)

Milki Getachew, Department of Social Work, University of Addis Ababa and PhD student at Goldsmiths University of London, welcomed the opportunity to reflect on her experience of working on uncertainty with young people in fragile contexts. One of the challenges she encountered was trying to find an equivalent translation of uncertainty in the local languages where she was conducting research. Surprisingly, she said, some young people occasionally viewed uncertainty as a positive.

'The most striking issue was that young people who live in a very fragile, in a very adverse situation, explain their uncertainty as positive at times. They didn't usually define it positively. They also define it negatively at times, but there are issues they define as positive uncertainty.'

Milki gave an example of a young man living in difficult circumstances in Addis Ababa who always carried passport in his pocket because he saw opportunity in the uncertainty of illegal migration to the Gulf compared to the stasis of his current situation. Milki also emphasised that young people are not only individual agents, but that in uncertainty, they also seek support from the people around them.

Amid Ahmed, former young researcher from YOUR world research project and former lecturer at Debre Markos University Department of Sociology, Addis Ababa University Institute of African Studies, continued by speaking about some of the other challenges of doing research on uncertainty in Ethiopia. He explained that it was difficult to find literature on youth relevant to the Ethiopian context which was not problem oriented. As a result, they tried to gain insight into what youth considered as their marginalisation as well as their aspirations. This required the use of participatory and innovative research methods and the creation of platforms for youth to communicate with national policy makers.

Nicola Ansell, Professor of Human Geography, Brunel University, reflected on her experiences of working in Southern Africa on youth aspirations and uncertainty. Nicola emphasised the diversity of young people due to place, situation and the diversity of thought within young people at different stages and moments.

'Some young people feel anxiety about the future because of its uncertainty. Others are hopeful or excited, perhaps envisioning themselves as having this sort of personal capacity to thrive when they're faced with challenges, and of course that can affect both about how you feel about the future, but also how you behave in relation to that.'

Nicola continued to explain how today, what was once considered a certain path, for example agriculture, can no longer be seen that way due to changing climate and unpredictable rainfall. She related this to her work in Lesotho, where she found that education was focused on survival –

economic, moral and physical - rather than embracing uncertainty. Nicola claimed that this created a tension between the entrepreneurial futures that the education system was proposing for the young people and the predictable, salaried jobs that the young people wanted.

Sumon Kamal Tuladhar, Nepal lead for YOUR World Research, and advisor to the British Council, Nepal, spoke about the importance of co-constructing research and dissemination activities with marginalised youth, who consider their marginalisation to stem from society and government systems. Sumon also emphasised a shift in how and who communicated research to duty-bearers. In validation workshops, marginalised youth received support to directly address policy makers:

The youth started to validate what is right, what is wrong in our research, and they corrected when necessary. And they came up with their voices – and this is the voices from the female children, youth with disabilities, LGBTQI community, and ethnic groups.... instead of [us] telling the duty-bearers, youth started to tell them what they really need – so they demanded their rights to education, citizenship, employment

Sumon said that since these engagements, there has been increased youth participation in Nepal.

Break-out conversations

After the presentations from guest speakers, the group moved into three break out rooms to discuss the following questions:

- What types and forms of uncertainty do you or the young people you work with experience?
- How have you / the young people you work with cope with uncertainty?
- What are some of the issues and / or opportunities with working with children and young people in uncertain times?

Once back in plenary, the facilitators of each breakout room shared key points from their conversations. A common theme throughout the feedback was the unique experiences of uncertainty of different groups of young people – students, youth with disabilities, tribal minority youth, children in care, and street-connected children. Each of these groups faced and dealt with uncertainty in different ways given the challenges and opportunities afforded to them. Clearly, there was need to continue these conversations.

Discussion

In the last session of the dialogue, Vicky introduced **Kavita Ratna**, Director of Advocacy at The Concerned for Working Children (CWC), to start a discussion on a call to action for people working in the area of child rights and participation. Kavita Ratna spoke about working with some of the most marginalised children in India. She shared two examples of young people identifying issues and making demands. Among these, two stood out – ‘See us as citizens today’ and the issue of self-determination. Kavita continued by reflecting on what these demands mean for adults supporting young people:

As adults, what are these implications? The minute we are looking at it from the framework of the child rights, then we are actually looking at sharing power. We're actually looking at being challenged and questioned. And these are very difficult areas. The other area is also that the minute we start talking about children's rights and participation it is not an abdication of our duty but actually an increase in our duty. Like they say that it is easier to protect a bird inside the cage the minute you want the bird to fly then you need to make the whole world safe.

Kavita argued that the right to self-determination was at the core of child and human rights discourse but that it was also the least understood of all rights. For children, exercising this right is particularly challenging because they lack the necessary structures, mechanism to hold stakeholders accountable and are often dependent on self-appointed adult advocates.

The Concerned for Working Children

The [Concerned for Working Children \(CWC\)](#) is an NGO based in Bengaluru, India. Active since the late 1970s, they were one of the first organisations in India to focus on working children and their needs. They have since become widely recognised as a world leader in child rights, particularly children's right to self-determination. CWC works in partnership with children and their communities; local governments; and national and international agencies to implement viable, comprehensive, and appropriate solutions to address the various problems that children and their communities face. They are committed to empowering children and ensuring their democratic participation in all matters that affect them.

Kavita ended her talk by exploring adults to build our capacity to work alongside and support children. She recommended that adults:

- Build their own capacity to envision, strategise, plan and monitor within a child rights frame
- Be accountable to children and be transparent to scrutiny
- Remember we were children once

Discussion

The discussion that followed Kavita's call to action, covered a wide range of topics.

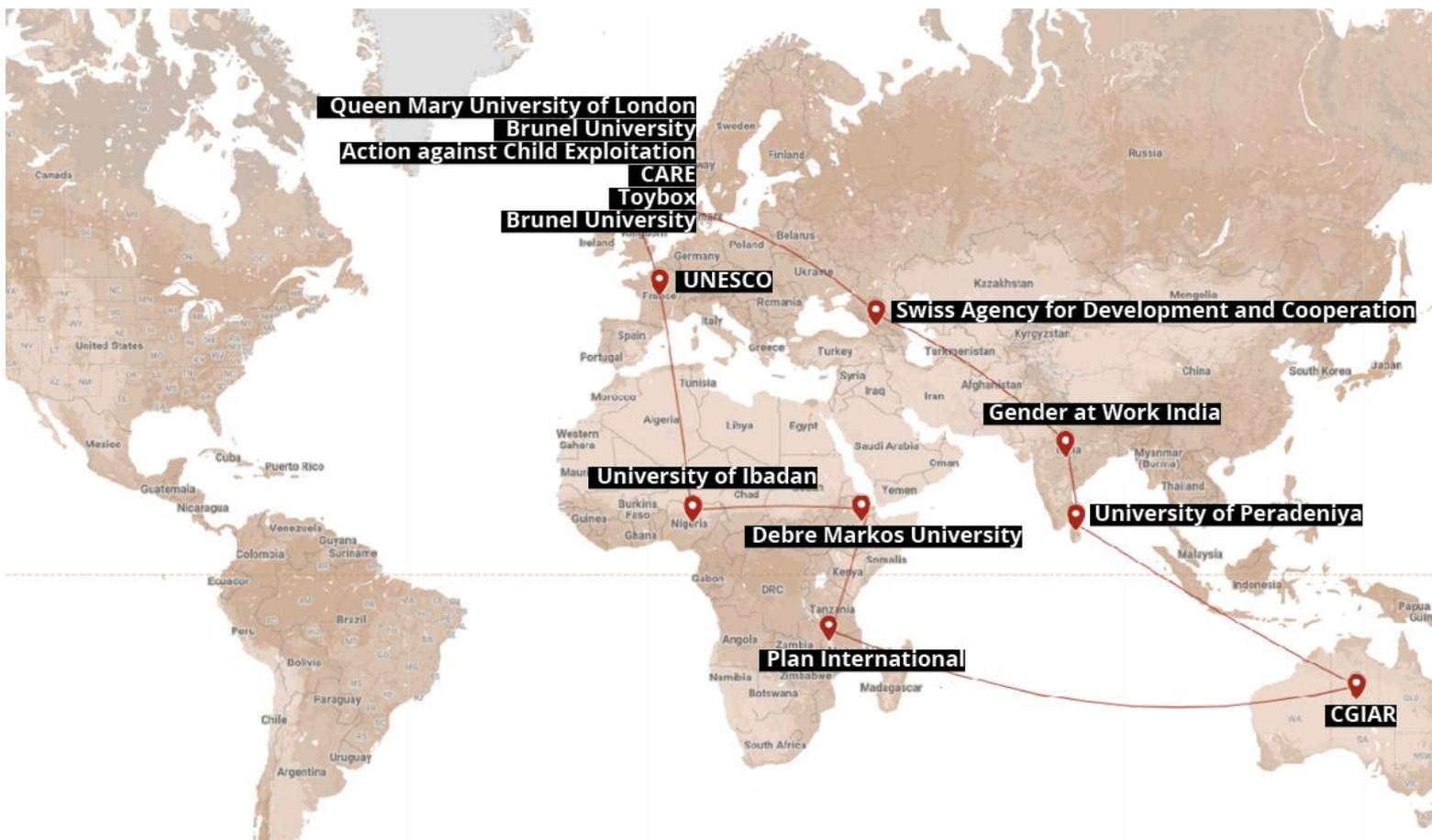
Phil Frampton reflected on the similarities between the discrimination against people of colour and ethnic minorities, and children and youth. He stated that a western imperialist model of childhood is being imposed on children around the world in ways which are harmful to them living dignified lives. Later, Vicky responded by highlighting how adultism is one of the last remaining acceptable 'isms'. Phil's comments also complement Kavita's later point (below) on children's right to survival.

Justin Flynn, Nicola Ansell and Kavita spoke about the distinctions between survival and opportunity and how these two states are connected to uncertainty. Justin suggested that more marginalised young people might look for a certainty of survival before they would undertake risk and pursue uncertain opportunities, whereas more affluent youth might pursue opportunities first and settle for survival should these not materialise. Kavita commented that many children are between 'existing' – which is the minimum of surviving - and 'living' and 'thiriving', She argued that work needs to focus on building systems which allow children and young people to go beyond basic survival. In order to do this, we must first respect that the right to survival comes before other rights and respect and support the choices that children make in order to survive. The attitude to uncertainty and the options that children and young people could envisage were very different depending on whether they had access to education or were marginalised and had failed or been unable to attend schools.

Nicola explained that survival in the context where she worked was not about a bare minimalist survival, but rather more about having a predictable life, a life in which one does not necessary have to struggle. She also contended that when young people 'try things out' it doesn't need to be seen as taking risk even though they may have uncertain results and this might be another way to think about what young people are doing.

Building connections

Attendees included adults and youth researchers from across the globe in conversation with a range of decision makers and funders. Organisations can be seen on the map below.



Source: Map data ©2022 Google, INEGI

Continuing the conversation

Blogs – REJUVENATE keep conversations around child and youth rights going through regular [blogs](#). If you have an idea for a blog, please do [get in touch with one of the REJUVENATE team via our website](#).

Explore and submit to our [Living Archive](#) – a collection of organisations, projects and resources all focused on child and youth rights and participation. We've included some examples in boxes in this paper. If you have an item you think others in the field can learn from, please [fill out our submission form](#).

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