

CODESRIA Planning Workshop: Children and Youth Programme – A Few Reflections and Suggestions

To start with, I would like to give a few contemporary and theoretical insights into the area of childhood and youth research. These guidelines might document the programme and place it in the context of contemporary debates, putting into perspective the contributions and innovations that the programme should be able to generate. These contemporary and theoretical insights highlight the inextricable links between theory (concepts), methodology and policies.

1. A review of contemporary work on childhood and youth classifies the contemporary concepts, feeding contemporary productions in this area into three types or categories (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin 2007):
 - i) *Childhood* - youth as a social and discursive space. An object of dispute and power.
 - ii) *Children* - youth as a more or less homogenous sociological group.
 - iii) *Child* - youth as an individual interacting with other individuals and as a source of experiences.
2. Criticism of representation and the heritage from literary criticism and "*linguistic turn*" in social science now recognise childhood and youth as constructed concepts, as being in permanent and emerging construction in the social structure; meaning a construction in which the "agents" so objectivised participate (Diouf 2003).
3. An old/new perspective is making a comeback on the front stage, that is, the "*culture & personality*" school (Quinn 2005). To me, this kind of interrogation becomes relevant by the very use that photography's famous representatives like M. Mead and G. Bateson made of it and by the link they have established between culture and an individual; despite the efforts mostly concentrated on these two concepts, they still constitute a source of many problems, as evidenced by the work developed under the aegis of the programme.

Guy Massart

Midelo Escola Internacional de Arte (MEIA), Bruxelles

4. I personally believe that a pragmatic approach involving rigorous empiric methods allows for the theoretical creativity required for the programme (Hasturp 2005).

The Challenges of a Childhood and Youth Research Programme in Africa

By identifying different categories of challenges, my intention is not to overlook the indissociable nature of point of views (theory, method, policy); however, this categorisation should make challenge operationalisation easier, leading to the adoption of concrete measures.

These challenges are identified through reading, participation in some programme activities as well as the discussions held and papers presented during the conference.

Disciplines

Programme renovation could be oriented through an obvious criterion. Or the criterion might at least constitute a focal point among others (themes, methods, comparison ...). The purpose is not to reproduce an objectivising construction of humanities, but it is necessary instead to encourage disciplinary integrations and hybridization. And yet, since researchers give themselves disciplinary identities reproducing in so doing the barriers and limits specific to mainstream academic institutions, it is important to see to it that more space is granted to all researchers. It is also clear that some phenomena traditionally falling within the realm of certain disciplines have not been fully exploited (or have been ignored by childhood and youth researchers), or their theoretical framework and methods have not been fully developed. One example is psychology, the private life of young children, personal experiences and their multiple consequences ... Additionally, existing

work prove beyond any doubt that children and youth's actions produce current society, its materiality and imagination. (de Boeck & Honwana 2005).

At the Institutional Level

At the institutional level, the main challenges are: relevance of research development support modalities, quality of accompaniment and monitoring, formation of a critical mass of researchers and productions, CODESRIA's capacity, research ethics and dialogue with other institutions and crafts.

Promotion Tools: My knowledge of CODESRIA's tools is not enough to make relevant proposals. However, as far as the modes of collective work used in different activities are concerned, new more result-oriented methods, based on clearly defined issues, should be experimented. These working methods adapted to collective work project should be combined with the traditional academic conference (under the guidance of a senior, presentation of papers assembled per subject and/or themes with comments/questions from the audience and answers by the speakers and closing by organiser).

The quality of accompaniment and monitoring is a central issue and should start as from researchers' first meetings. The focus of attention is primarily practice on the ground. Researchers need regular accompaniment. They also need very practical training to get familiarised with research tools, build a common reflection base, correct failures and mistakes, and proceed further to build exploitable data bases. In fact, using new research-related technologies both in data gathering (images, digital sound) and data base building represent contemporary challenges. The use of qualitative data processing in particular should be developed. Researchers' communication capacities (articles, presentations) should constitute either specific activities or otherwise be integrated in existing ones.

Very few West African researchers are able to stabilise themselves long enough to develop a practice of researching children and youth and/or quite familiarise them-

selves with the important texts and build a badly missing more theoretical perspective. It is important to support and maintain, in the long run, the researchers working on this domain. CODESRIA can contribute to improving this situation by developing such activities as would help accompany researchers in their developments; but researchers will also have to be put in contact with other organisations and resources. Building a database on work available electronically is a priority.

CODESRIA's Capacities: I am not quite familiar with the work environment of CODESRIA, in terms of financial and human resource management. All the above-mentioned institutional avenues require additional human resources, first internally for coordination and organisation functions. Besides, a number of external resources will have to be hired on contract as and when the need arises. Yet, we know that donors tend to be reluctant when it comes to increasing spending on supervision, despite the fact that the latter represent an essential guarantee for research quality.

Last but not least, regarding inter-institutional relations, there are two aspects to them: relations with CODESRIA can be established by service and/or information-requesting institutions subject to the services available; CODESRIA itself may do the same towards other institutions. I believe CODESRIA, and particularly this programme, is seriously considering its advocacy mission; it should have a proactive attitude and propose cooperation ties/services to agencies (governmental, UN, NGOs, Foundations).

Methodologies

Rigour, duration, reaching out and methodology! I cannot develop these four items in this context. Yet, I would like to insist on a few substantive issues. I strongly believe that the fact of reproducing the stereotypes hampering childhood and youth research is of a sociological nature; it has to do with researcher estrangement from the majority of the population they are supposed to be studying; like many contemporary activists, they do not value knowledge and "inferiors'" practices (empathy should be the key word). The gaps are mostly socio-economic, cultural, gender and language-related. Against this backdrop, researchers have to be given resources that would allow them extended stay on the ground; financial resources and monitoring are im-

portant. It is undeniable that having child support institutions (agencies) alone feed childhood and youth research, through consultancy service, ideologically frames analyses and limits creativity.

The empiric childhood researcher must be able to acquire the capacity to prompt children and youth's expressions; this is a particular know-how which exists outside academic circles in the world of expression arts with which researchers and teachers have to establish cooperation ties.

Research work too often ignores basic rules because of lack of time, money.... The situation seems to be catastrophic as far as quantitative domain is concerned. Quantitative analysis capacities are often concentrated in a few private knowledge production and even polling and measuring institutes that still produce the best research work (or at least the best tools). Experts tend to come together within these institutes and sell their services to institutions; establishing cooperation ties with these institutions, placing scholars with them appear to be an exploitable option. These forms of cooperation are practised with some of these private enterprises. Teaching and CODESRIA also ought to show more rigour by demanding more scientifically-based elements in this area; this ranges from terminology error (everything is about "sampling") to methodological errors, biased questionnaires, lousy sampling, as shown by the presentation on Respondent-Driven Sampling; here again, innovation and experimentation are central.

Last but not least, methodological weaknesses are to be linked with theoretical weaknesses which in my view might be summarised as the lack of a dynamic approach to reality, the absence of a dialogic vision. In this sense, I believe that language studies are a much recommended domain in that they allow a dynamic vision to be developed with long tested concepts.

The purpose at this point is not to produce a manual but to favour instead the publication of a series of concrete experiences on children-adapted methods, allowing them to be associated with research. Research is to be understood here in the holistic sense, not only as data capturing methods but also as an activity integrated in the milieu that produces them. What do we want to learn? How are we going to share it and with whom? What

have we learnt and how do we conserve its trace so we can reflect on it? Creating and documenting research work methods with children and youth is a much recommended area of inter-institutional cooperation.

Policies

By definition, CODESRIA's calling is to work towards development promotion from an African perspective in the area of social science. As far as childhood and youth programme is concerned, the range of childhood-oriented policies is a very narrow one. Conventions, charters and protocols have mapped out a "universal" normative framework. Research has the capacity and obligation to question existing normative frameworks and to test them through public opinion as well as citizens' daily experiences and their concrete impacts. It must also be noted that most of the research in circulation has been produced by, or at the initiative of, intervention institutions. Censuring is common practice in post-production (manuscript editing, work falling into oblivion). It seems to me that childhood ideological construction is therefore a research area that ought to be favoured. Collective work is essential. More concretely, there should be more analyses done on childhood and youth construction from various points of view, age, capacity to provide support to dependants, reproduction, economy, cognitive aspect, etc. This is a broad-ranging and exciting issue. Ideological discussion and advocacy should also be considered, not only from a resistance perspective, but also in terms of developing the existing framework. In this sense, the issue about children and youth's citizenship in the light of their agency, and the constraints faced by both boys and girls, is a matter that ought to be developed. It is superficially contemplated under the term "participation in existing texts" and tends to ignore the endogenous forms of participation.

Dissemination

Naturally, CODESRIA should be proud of its publication and distribution capacity. It is important to clearly define the targets and objectives of CODESRIA. Whether CODESRIA should develop specific publications in the area is a question I cannot answer. Yet, I have two observations to make: maintaining a journal through periodic publication is constraining; is it not important to encourage African authors to publish in existing journals

in Africa and abroad? The publication of a series of volumes is a more flexible option.

Here again, one has to note the power of major international agencies to produce and disseminate on the Web contents on childhood and youth in Africa. It seems to me that African presence on the Web should be encouraged. As a research promoting agency, CODESRIA should encourage researchers to produce for different media: radio, podcast, footage, multimedia presentations. This is an urgently needed effort. Especially if you consider that in our area of interest, research topics tend to be very fond of expressing themselves and exchanging through these diverse media. Once again, one recommendable option is to establish cooperation ties with artists and communicators.

Dissemination is neither a phase nor an activity, it is a knowledge building process. It is important to develop interactions with knowledge targets (agencies, governmental institutions, youth, children's associations ...) soon after designing the questioning; here CODESRIA researchers should again be more proactive.

Ethics

It seems to me that CODESRIA should urgently offer ethical research protocol evaluation services in childhood and youth domain. One or more committees must be able to rely on guidelines that are yet to be determined. It is worth noting that several organisations involved with childhood and youth have produced, and are still working towards producing, ethical, guidelines for research with participation of children.

Research ethical problems vary according to theoretical approach. One would notice that once research focuses on a "problem" as a specific object (hence, in relation to standards – what standards?); finding oneself in an extraction perspective, like expressing a child's suffering, raises the question of how does one manage that suffering, the expression of which was prompted with the help of a researcher; this is particularly true in psychological studies; but all ethnographers have to confront these same interrogations.

Activity Identification Process

I insisted on dissemination as a process. I also underscored the importance of associating different categories of actors to research once the issues have been de-

termined. In this area, policy makers' voices carry more weight than African children and youth. CODESRIA's support should allow research to be developed outside its self-defined themes; or in other words, support must be granted to processes in which research issues are produced by interacting with the subjects and by establishing dialogue between the subjects and other persons and important actors for them, I mean parents and artists. The experimentation of this practice might be contemplated as a methodological exploration project, or CODESRIA might develop this process as part of a collaborative ethnographic project or as a collaborative empiric research team.

Example of Two Actors: Western Scholarship and the United Nations¹

I have asked two persons familiar with children and youth research to reflect with me on research challenges in Africa. This text has been documented by these discussions and suggestions. However, the points made by my female and male interlocutors are summarised below:

Innocenti Research Centre – UNICEF, Child Protection Specialist:

- Need for reliable statistics with child-centred indicators; indicators much needed to monitor children's situations.
- Find, in research, systematic and holistic approaches. Need for longitudinal studies.
- Participatory research research with children's participation.
- The childhood perception issue. This issue should be seen in a long-term perspective focused on social change. This effort should basically involve local research actors who should and could benefit from capacity building.
- Explore further children's resilience.

Scholarship, Anthropology and Education, Canada:

I present, in a very synthetic form, the suggested areas of research:

- efficient symbiosis between education and work for children;
- evolutionary forms of youth's social capital;
- citizenship expressions in a broad ecologic perspective;
- "Youth subculture", with a special focus on gender-based variations;

- links between youth's rights and women's rights.

Themes

A Few Preliminary Reflections

The three conferences organised by CODESRIA over the past three years, in order to evaluate the results produced by childhood and youth programme as well as contemporary debates and research in Africa, showed the fruitfulness and relevance of treating children and the youth like a contemporary agency, and not like passive actors simply produced by society. Youth and children clearly appear to be participating in society production and structuring (Shanahan 2007). In the wake of the work produced by a few great African researchers (including but not limited to Reynolds, Biaya, Diouf, Mbembe, etc), this is particularly clear from a cultural, political, sociological, economic, space and social imagination point of view. We are incited by these observations to go beyond constructing a child and youth as a victim but also as an actor even if constrained, in one word, a subject caught in power relations. Comparatively, however, children have been less studied than youth.

Despite the many demonstrations of youth agency (see for example Biaya 2000), conferences, articles and proposals by African researchers, time and again, present children and youth like objects forged by imported cultural products, passive receptors and reproducers of the values, languages and behaviours conveyed through these cultural products. I am speaking here as an anthropologist which I am. Yet, the theoretical challenge of contemporary anthropology is still, and always, establishing a linkage between daily experiences and broader historic processes. But a number of research productions too often seem to project general postcolonial inequality relations over the individual themselves. While this rhetorical process has a powerful political charge, it clearly jeopardises our efforts at knowledge production and support to the individuals concerned, that is, children and youth. We ought to observe power at play and its effects at all levels, and, especially, that of the subjects' experiences as they feed social science research.

Changing youth and children's relations to authorities in the broad sense – to authorities – is at the heart of individualisation process (Jenks 2005) which in turn is

at the core of the social process of aging. Exploring such changes, not only in their sociological duration, but also in terms of daily interactions and individuals' biographies constitute as many dimensions that ought to be explored as a way of re-visiting these individualisation and aging concepts. There are two other dimensions, in my view, that can orient this compulsory theorisation work towards self-production in contemporary Africa, a concept at the heart of childhood and youth. The first one is creation analysis, exploring and connecting new social spaces (physical, virtual, imagination); the second dimension relates to "self", in the prospect of increasing the number of identifications, hence of actors, spaces, relevant situations which are largely associated with the globalisation process. I believe that the suggestion to study language forms and the relationship between formulation and action is a possible and fruitful option.

Lessons must be drawn from these elements:

First, CODESRIA should clearly state the common features between these two categories of subjects, children and youth; this will make it possible to clearly identify the programme baselines.

There is also need to further explore the various constructions of childhood and youth at different levels, discursive and interactional. This should constitute a specific activity, an essential cornerstone, in programme foundation. More efforts should be put into contextualising, so to speak, and theorising childhood and youth in Africa.

Thirdly, it is necessary indeed to induce longitudinal and comparative studies. This objective can be a long-term support tool for African researchers. Comparison allows contact to be established between institutions and researchers, but it is also important to permit researchers to study several sites and populations and to favour comparison between different fields.

Fourthly, it is important to develop the activities favouring the study of child's education process, or child rearing process. This approach can be positively documented by the work done by the culture and personality school.

Empiric studies and African researchers' experiences can, as of now, allow for systematisation of development phases

based on social, cognitive, driving and economic factors. Research efforts, meaning methodological in this case, must be founded on these local categories.

Lastly, sending the distinction between childhood and youth into abyss, calls for the broader issue of what aging means in contemporary Africa, to be revisited and updated. Transitions need to be observed between categories, self-perceptions in their daily and ritual expressions.

From the methodological point of view, it appears clearly that there is a significant need for capitalisation of working methods, whether collaborative or not, with children and youth. These methods should be determined as a function of children's liking and interests. This observation is generalised (see for example Levine's recommendations 2007). The lack of methodological refinement is of course linked to the underdevelopment of studies on childhood and youth in Africa and globally.

The Themes

Based on the reflections developed together in Douala, I would like to present what we called "research themes". I will go over and complete the three major lines of action as formulated by Mwenda Ntarangwi.

Popular Expressions: Popular expressions by children and youth (languages, music, religion, dance, sports, game ...). This line of action should not be restricted to producing expressions alone, but should also consider matters relating to reception of cultural contents; the work done by the English cultural studies might be a source of inspiration.

Child Rearing: This encompasses child rearing and different capacity building techniques. Developing their social capacities is a central issue; children's accountabilities, decision-making and initiatives in their daily life situation. The role of peers in the rearing process must draw special attention. The construction of gender relations is a central theme of this line of action, masculinity and femininity and their porosity and alternatives must draw special attention, in terms of both language and practices.

Relations with the Public Sphere: In my understanding, this line of action should consider research on "self", the body and their training techniques; this is in addition to the continuation of work on relations between generations, institutions, social movements and political systems.

Aging: I believe that the aging process should constitute a specific research orientation. My conviction stems from the self-evident observation that childhood, youth and adulthood; that children, youth, adults and quite many other categories exist through inter-dialogue in specific social spaces. How are those social spaces produced? Who produces them? How do these transition changes evolve between aging categories? What are the social effects of these changes? How do children and youth themselves experience these transitions?

Gender-based distinction should be part of a constant comparative discipline. Methodological issues are transversal and should be determined for each project and show their relevance through the topics.

Notes

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