Réact!ons

Intervention through Active Listening: Tracing the Lives of West African Children and Young People.[1]

Abdou Salam FALL[2] et Guy MASSART[3]

This regional research was initiated by the West Africa Regional Office (WARO) of Plan International and can be found at www.reactions-africa.org. Plan WARO has also coordinated research implementation. Funding has been provided by the Dutch Office of Plan International (Plan Nederland – www.plannederland.org).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The pauperization that characterizes West Africa[4] contributes to perpetuating the image of the child as a problem for adult society. Ethnographic research carried out in 2005–2006 in five West African countries (Benin, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Niger and Senegal) emphasized active listening as a way to rethink intervention for children and young people. Inspired by their different universes, this experience provides a new perspective and invites a fresh viewpoint. Children and young people evolve within the environments that socialize them; but they shape the environment as much as it shapes them, influencing their way of life, relationships and expectations for the future.

Children's experiences are not exclusively limited to the spheres of family, education and play. On the contrary, their power of expression increasingly develops within the social framework and constitutes a genuine tool for changing their experience. No longer can they be seen simply as future economic agents; they now must be recognized for their contribution to society as full-fledged citizens.

Throughout the research, children demonstrated impressive potential for innovation and creation. However, they remain victims of and actors in various forms of violence, and are further victimized by the diverse constraints presented in this article.

Children's and young people's experiences are always contrasting. Very sensitive social changes are in progress. The ethnographic research results have made it possible to highlight evolutions that lie at the heart of children's vulnerability and activities. Therefore, an intervention system must focus on listening—with special attention paid to day-to-day ethnographic detail.

Firstly, this contribution emphasizes the child's evolutionary cycles—cycles that continually adjust to social reality. Then, it acknowledges the significant influence played by peer groups, no matter which socio-economic category and gender. The following chapters demonstrate how children and young people keep their distance from institutional power, clearing their way to create their own spaces for citizenship. Organization of these changes resembles a reconfiguration of communities and reveals marked interest in new forms of social compromise.

Hence, this article highlights how violence influences and structures relationships between children and their social environment. Children and young people react subtly, often by reproducing the violence they see in society or resorting to survival strategies—such as migration—that are seen as markers of distress. Active listening that supports children provides a way to understand how to improve interventions in their favor. As a result, new avenues for intervention have been outlined.

4• Based on the 2004 monetary poverty index, 45% of households live on less than one dollar per day in West Africa.

1. ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH INTUITIONS ABOUT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The concept of active listening used in the research is based on the assumption that children assert themselves as agents in our contemporary world. It also aims to identify effective mechanisms set up by communities which protect children. For an NGO that is focused on children, such as Plan International, this objective demonstrates the importance of basing interventions on practices that already exist within groups.

… a harmful gap between "developers" and the young population

The research takes off from the observation that very little is known about living conditions for the vast majority of young people, who, in the end, remain foreign to decision makers and even development agents. Frequently, a gap arises between the presuppositions of development agents and the experiences and actions of their "targets." Another fundamental observation is essential: all human potential and rationality must be trusted. In other words, it is only by valuing local practices that we can hope to build a more equitable world. Based on these observations and in the hopes of providing a justified response, the research seeks to understand how children and young people construct their lives. Children in the region live in a world marked by instability that lacks any future prospects. They are convinced of their poverty and cultivate a negative perception about themselves, combined with the idea of lacking. And yet, everyday they show their determination and immense willingness, creativity and adaptability. Improving their living conditions obviously occurs by recognizing this impressive determination and the huge efforts they make.

… l'écoute active pour communier avec le monde des enfants

This research is founded on two basic intuitions ("listening" and "agent"), reflected in its title: "Listening to Children and Young People, Agents in our Contemporary World." In documents produced during the research, the researchers endeavored to construct an informed sociology based on the perceptions of children and young people. The adopted methods and approaches combine the following principles: observation, listening, understanding, empathy, humility, debate and trust. In effect, it is time for us as researchers and intervenors to recognize the need to learn from our interlocutors and to stop considering them as objects or beneficiaries that can be manipulated. Activities with groups of youth and children have been carried out with the support of the ethnographers and artists (rap, drama, photography, research groups) to facilitate the expressions of the children and youth. This approach has produced results that should continue to be developed.

2. THE EVOLUTIONARY CYCLES OF CHILDREN

Socialization is an ongoing, long-term process. Throughout childhood and youth, it marks daily life in society. During early childhood, the mother-child relationship is fundamental in the socialization process. The father remains in the background, but represents the family authority. When one of the grandparents lives in the same compound as the parents, the child is under his or her watch.

... after baptism, massaging the body ensues as a second cultural rite

Following baptism, shaping the body ensues as a second rite. This massage molds the child's body so that it will fit into the canons of the cultural aesthetic later. It makes it supple and agile. Many practitioners attribute the virtues of preventing benign illnesses or possible minor bone fractures to it. Even though gender differences are not marked in infants, each requires a specific approach since massage techniques for shaping boys and girls differ.

In addition to attending to her child's vital needs (food, supervision and care), mothers generally also lavish him or her with affection. The parents and their immediate environment instruct the child about social life by setting rules for what is allowed and forbidden. Usually the child submits to the rules because society does not negotiate the rules with children. Hence the first relationships develop with vertical, authoritarian or hierarchical rationales that imply that adjustments are made by the individuals and not the universe.

In addition, throughout childhood, time is also set aside for sharing stories, legends and proverbs. These sessions aim to transmit cultural heritage, particularly reference values in the most suggestive way. The images, narratives and characters are chosen based on their messages while taking into account the child's age and comprehension level.

The development process for individuation is comparable in the different countries with the following common significant stages: birth, weaning, early childhood, first domestic teachings, lessons in work, training in production capacity and supplying means of production, economic autonomy, marriage, maternity/paternity and notability. Babies are weaned around 22 or 23 months. At this time, the baby is no longer carried on the mother's back and enters the domestic space where the mother, sisters, cousins, young aunts, etc. will take care of him or her. Towards age four, the child leaves the domestic circle and explores community space. Depending on the child's gender, he or she is assigned tasks that are usually repeated. Girls are often assigned chores that are more regular and certainly more demanding.

... learning productive work, a way of life

Children play a central role in the family unit's productive work. Instruction about producing begins around age seven. At this time, the child accompanies an older child of the same gender in productive activities. He or she listens and learns through imitation and gradually the child's autonomy develops. As the child grows up, he or she is entrusted with the means of production. Towards age 10–12, the children gain knowledge and actions that allow them to be producers in their own right, even if they lack the strength to carry out activities on the same level as adolescents and adults.

"My name is Thiam. I am 15 years old and I come from D., from a family of blacksmiths. I have been learning this profession with my father since I was little. Now, I know how to forge all kinds of instruments like my father: machetes, axes, knives, hoes, etc. Even when my father is away, I do all the work clients ask for; [...] this work is very hard and requires many precautions, because of the fire and because I lack the strength to rapidly strike the hot iron. But even so, I can make five machetes a day, and each one costs 1500 FCFA. Nevertheless, the money does not go to me." Thiam. Guinea Bissau.

The research also demonstrates that in some places, at about age 12–15, children organize themselves into affinity groups to produce their own resources.

… productive maturity and reproductive maturity are merging

Considerable diversity has been observed regarding the relation between the age of productive maturity and the age of reproductive maturity. Previously, between the time when a child acquires production capacity and that of marriage and maternity/paternity, young people worked for their families, ideally based on the model dictated by gender and age hegemony. Their productivity contributed income for the family unit, led by a mature male. Currently, this period between productive maturity and reproductive maturity is decreasing, but it takes place outside of the family framework, marking the growing individuality of young people. This involves diversification of the established models, including new family arrangements that are more functional.

Between the ages of 13 and 18, girls truly cease being children. From the first signs of puberty, they can be married off or at least take control of their fertility (Blanc et alia, 2005); in other words, they reach reproductive maturity in the eyes of their co-citizens. In research sites in Guinea Bissau, girls lose their virginity around age 12 or 13.

In addition, an early willingness for autonomization has been noted, whether in the pursuit of education, migration, marriage, setting up house (trial marriage in Guinea, for example) or paternity/maternity. Young people gain autonomy from the unit and authority dictated by gender and seniority. It is a crucial fact for the future of the region's young people and children, and this process of individualization is seen in all of the research sites.

… initiation, a self-perpetuating rite

Ritualized socialization and hardship are justified through the initiation, which constitutes a milestone in preparing for future adulthood. In rural forest areas, initiation continues to be a determining step in the acquisition of social status in the community of origin. This rite contributes to socialization. Anyone who is not recognized as initiated will be distanced from the spheres of decision making and excluded from community activities. What follows is stigmatization that is so strong that young girls demand that they go through the excision ritual to avoid public disgrace. (Behrendt, 2005)

Although rites for socialization are maintained in some rural societies, despite their constant transformation, these changing societies take advantage of their hybridity by combining the desire to return to their original identities and the need to develop new social arrangements, thus making room for social creativity. Intense work around identity production simmers within discourses and the search for authenticity. The morals that make a child or young person's future dependent on the parents' blessings undergo the same fate. In effect, even those children who have not challenged this ideology hold the elders, and by extension the authorities, just as accountable for

the failures of the last decades. Consequently, the older generation has been disqualified from claiming their continued role as the principle reference. As a result, young people are driven to face life differently rather than by following the path set out by their parents. This disintegration of the importance of classic referents in the construction of identity goes hand in hand with the individual's development of self-consciousness.

The child and young person refer to the extended family. Here, services and functionality are observed during culminating celebrations for rites of passage such as circumcision or during familial ceremonies. Uncles and aunts are very active in social mediation when choosing a spouse; grandparents impart advice and are guardians in perpetuating morality and bonds. The family network is woven around the child depending on the existing circumstances. However, economic destitution accompanies the loss of social ties more and more, and even the collapse of the relational network. The parents' poverty deprives them of social power even in the family and deprives the child of vital, accessible social links. The parents' weak social capital also denies access to common goods and services.

... age and gender, permanent social markers

Children's social relationships depend on their age. The older they are, the more precise the separation between the two sexes and between the age groups. Up until age 10, companionship among children does not take gender into consideration as children from the same neighborhood gather together. In other cases, friendship goes beyond the neighborhood boundaries and is defined by sports, music, family networks and the parents' friendships.

At age 10–12 years, the separation that started at age 8, depending on social categories, becomes more definite. This separation is often due to the precociousness among young girls. In certain social milieus, like the Halpulaar and Soninké of Senegal and Mali, it is related to their custom for early marriage and role taking by young boys.

... increasingly varied social references and models

School has the duty to guarantee social mobility and prepare students for entry into professional and social situations by correcting and remodeling social differences based on the rules of broader citizenship. More and more, school is being relieved of its role by peer groups, those brought together in the classroom, neighborhood or in sports and recreation spaces. School and associative life are becoming extensions of the family unit and make it possible, to some extent, to remedy the reproduction of social differences.

Within the family unit, the child receives counseling from his or her brothers and sisters. This supervision has the advantage of closer proximity than the increasingly distant parental protection. While boys begin to learn a trade, the young girl ceases to be a playmate and draws closer to her mother for initiation into domestic practices that prepare her to become a capable woman who can manage a household. Within this domestic space, the young girl learns new values that emphasize her feminine characteristics.

Finally, it has been noted that affinity groups made up of young boys more often function under the management of a leader, while those of girls are more consensual. At this stage one must consider children's and young people's living spaces to understand how they fit into social categories—space being a central factor in the production and reproduction of identities.

3. LIVING SPACES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDREN

Some recreational spaces are located close to production sites. For example, in some rural areas, the area where palm-oil extraction takes place not only serves as a space for heavy production, but is also a place where different generations interact. It is a space for socialization where, through playing out roles, the child learns certain forms of social relationships such as coveillance.[5] The children are commonly in the fields, which are considered second homes for farmers and their children.

In urban areas, play areas are generally located outside of the living space, in an enclosed public place or on winding neighborhood streets. When playing fields in the strict sense exist, they are often multi-use. In some cases, play time can also involve competitive games involving money, like the card game "pèlèpa" in Guinea. Each player can bet 100 Guinea Francs (GF) and the winner takes home 600 GF, which is used for a meal or to purchase various items.

... affinity groups based on living space

Affinity groups also form and disband depending on the rhythm of circumstances. They contribute by offering children and young people the socializing resources lacking in the family. The names they use to define their meeting spaces are varied. In Guinea, these groups take on the names of radio broadcasting: France Inter and BBC. Children and young people all bring up the need to communicate differently than they do within the frameworks of school and the family institution. Boys and girls visit these places at different times. The distinction between age groups becomes apparent when the demands of work come into play, since work spaces are divided more formally than the informal meeting places.

... self perceptions, reflections of pauperism

Nevertheless self-perception remains very negative. The young people and children with whom the researchers worked perceive themselves as poor and disadvantaged. This negative self-perception often derives from the effect of hierarchization produced by development ideology marked by the evolutionary paradigm. This ideology, particularly prevalent when external development agents interact with day-to-day reality (as with Plan), obscures local initiatives, tactics and strategies undertaken by communities for their struggles and resistance. There are at least three reasons why local initiatives have been stifled by development ideology: (i) because they go against "universal" values and prescribed models, such as those concerning child labor or children's participation in the local economy or even mobility; (ii) because they are generally ignored in development policies defined outside of the setting; and (iii) because reproducing the image of powerlessness and ignorance seems inescapable when dealing with the poor masses, whose children are the primary "specimens." Therefore, when compared to those who are developed, the under-developed logically remain so.

An exploration of children's aspirations and desires reveals a genuine, ingrained reference model. Children and young people express their needs: to be respected as a person in his or her own right; to have the right to self-determination; to enjoy basic services, good health, education, shelter and freedom of expression; to be listened to and to be loved.

---

5 • When referring to children, coveillance (or watching out for each other) is characterized by the protection offered by various actors who are present where children live. In this text, the term mainly refers to the coveillance between children and young people from different categories.

Even within communities, poverty has its indicators. The poor lack money and liquidity to pay for water, milling, healthcare and dowries. They depend on others, to whom they are tied to through debt. The poor lack means; production factors elude them; and they do not have the land or man power within the family to mobilize nor the network of immigrants who can transfer money or goods to them. Furthermore, in the Sahel, a prevalent caste system hierarchizes and isolates certain groups.

… representations that endure throughout social changes

From a young age, the child's modeling is based on the dominant production system, which maintains total influence over the configuration of social institutions. Hence, today, rituals organized by the Toma in Forest Guinea for boys reproduce the profile of a warrior, entrusted with the necessary courage to face any test, while girls remain confined to the role of mother and manager of domestic finances.

At the same time, there is a tendency to restrict the close-knit group who is in charge of the child. In effect, even if the child belongs to the community at large, daily caretaking and upbringing falls exclusively on the father and mother with marginal intervention from aunts and uncles. Once a boy can earn income for cutting palm bunches, he changes status. Similarly, discovering sexuality is enough for a child to move from his or her former status. On the other hand, in the eyes of the parents and during their lifetimes, the children continue to be perceived by their elders as a child.

Réactions

4. CHILDREN'S WORK AND ENTERING THE WORKFORCE

In the compound, the child learns to keep busy through the ongoing delegation of chores—cleaning, upkeep and errands—and is also initiated into the fields when he or she can hold her own. In many countries, it has been observed that children look after themselves from the age of nine.

The sometimes considerable gap between children's needs and their parents' or guardians' economic potential leads to mutual behavior adjustments. Children - both boys and girls- set up a parallel network of socio-economic activities while parents watch over them less. The aforementioned self-initiated groups take on all of their meaning from here. The children organize themselves into association work groups and act as service providers of seasonal tasks: drying coffee beans, clearing, soil burning, weeding rice fields, planting, harvesting and transporting grains.

In Forest Guinea, the individualization process leads children and young people to possess their own field. When the father is away from the home (death, migration, divorce, etc.) or too poor, children and young people are forced to take on an economic role prematurely, and as a result must drop out of school. Moreover, some activities—cutting palm bunches, palm extraction or collecting raffia wine—require agility so they are left to children and young people who will then gain resources. When the young people hand out contracts offering remunerated services to adults, they do not need mediation from other adults. Similarly, they sell products from their fields without having to refer to their parents. The earned monetary resources allow them to further gain autonomy. Nevertheless, use of these earned resources faces tough negotiations.

… to survive, children reciprocate with each other

Similarly, tontines, or rotating savings groups, enable young people to build solid financial networks, based on the rule of "constraint towards self-constraint," emphasized by Norbert Elias. The savings they mobilize contributes to purchasing clothes, shoes or school supplies when necessary. Their aspiration to wear new clothes, and no longer just the second-hand clothes that their parents get them for lack of anything better, brings some satisfaction. A desire to break from the regular routine has been observed among young people. Thus, peer groups have another reason to exist; they make it possible to escape the rigidity of other social institutions.

The process of individualization, observed simultaneously in the production system and in social organization, contributes to socializing the work done by children and young people. This work, while premature, is not perceived by those involved or by their parents as exploitation. The Toma proverb "The spider earns its provisions in the web that it weaves" systemizes children's early entry into work, while fully pointing out the desire for self sufficiency in a domestic economy. Therefore, power relations are embedded in economic and social organization, while the life trajectory set out by parents for their children is contested by the latter.

… young people's entry into the workforce, brutal and marginal

Economic crisis erodes the social net. Vulnerability factors that push the middle class into instability take away any possibility of helping young people. Since social capital is essential to entering the workforce, the young people resort to the solidarity of peer groups and employ real strategies for creating riches. Belonging to religious communities (Muslim and Christian) is also instrumental in constructing social capital.

Young people's entry into the workforce through economic or cultural activities has impacts on social recognition. This translates into:
- Role taking in community life, making the young person an economic actor who counts;
- Young people taking a stand; and
- "Demarginalization" by way of transferring the power of social criticism to young rappers (Senegal) or through the role assumed by a folk figure in Guinea Bissau (Cancurã).

Young people's entry into the workforce, through utilitarian jobs with immediate and minimal gains, instills social mobility that becomes decisive.

5. VULNERABILITIES AND FORMS OF VIOLENCE SUFFERED BY CHILDREN

When addressing the vulnerability and violence suffered by children, street culture appears to be fertile ground. The street even has a societal counter culture "conducive to developing criminality" according to observations made by Hérault (1997:4). Diop and Faye (1997:149) analyze this street culture as an "attempt at subverting or rewriting the dominant societal social norms." Children and young people use the street to express their inclinations to reconsider social order. This dynamic of occupying their own community spaces has been noted in all of the research sites. In most cases, they are reproducing violence there.

Hérault (1997:149) does not hesitate to point out the "responsibility of the entire social body" for the violence inflicted on young people. Our ethnographic research has revealed several forms of violence against children: corporal punishment, food deprivation, forced marriage, violence specific to gender relationships starting after puberty, a high propensity for punishment or casting spells and the use of sorcery as reported in Benin and Guinea. The list stops here with a few forms of violence, without intending to be exhaustive.

... gender

Young girls represent a weak group, placed at the bottom of the social scale. Violence against them is widespread. They are mainly subjected to violence during interactions with adult or young males. As in all situations of masculine hegemony, women—and a fortiori, girls—are restricted to specific spaces and functions. The domestic space is one of them, precisely where social control exerted by the adults is the strongest. Beyond there, markets, school, the bush, video clubs, public places and night are perceived as threats to social order. Girls' husbands, their mothers-in-law and their mothers are responsible for their behavior and bodies. Within the context of numerous altercations with husbands and co-wives, the mothers occupy an intermediary position, fluctuating between support and reprimand. Redefinition depicts gender relationships as tense, even violent, as the shift is made from the paternalistic model supported by masculine hegemony. In addition to causing great physical and psychological suffering, this situation gives rise to a profound redefinition of gender relationships and identity (Massart, 2005). This broader perspective regarding confrontation between the genders and generations is necessary to understand the tricks used by young girls to escape being controlled and to free themselves. In a situation that can be characterized, on the one hand, by the aspiration for autonomy and individual recognition, and on the other hand, by the crucial issues inherent in female youth and fertility, managing access to their bodies—pleasure and fertility—becomes an issue of major tactical manipulation for a girl.

... taking care of children and abuse of power

The identity crisis is accompanied by stigmatization of children and young people in urban cities (De Boeck and Honwana, 2005). This situation also fosters the emergence of a form of child exploitation through manipulation of spiritual power. Some adult marabouts in the cities of Senegal, Guinea, Guinea Bissau and Niger have ended up transforming their spiritual practice into a lucrative, economic activity that conforms to the market system. Their method consists of turning boys, children into "talibés" who are responsible for begging in the city streets, and who must then hand over their income to the marabout. Those talibés who fail to collect alms often suffer corporeal punishment or will be denied a meal that evening.

The talibé is placed in an environment with many risks such as sexual abuse and its subsequent risks of being infected by HIV/AIDS or other STIs, traffic accidents, drugs, and violent crime, particularly around adolescence. In addition, the breaking up and reconfiguration of families, combined with instability, make the barriers imposed by moral and societal values obsolete. Since these values are hardly in use, the door is open to violence and abuse.

... children are exposed to high risks

In the opinion of interlocutors and researchers, sexual activity intervenes very early into the lives of children. In rural areas, observations point to a constant rate of sexual activity among children and young people, occurring outside of the family compound. On the other hand, young people also indicate a gap in their knowledge about sexuality and reproductive health.

For all of the countries in the study, it was noted that child sexual abuse occurs within the heart of the family. This problem is further exacerbated by the existence of networks and socio-economic conditions that promote it. Child sexual abuse is not restricted to tourist areas, but occurs even more frequently within the local population. Frequent contact between children and those they must respect creates proximity and the type of relationship conducive to abuse, particularly in their relationships with Koranic masters, bumsters or tourists.

Therefore, as protection against these various vulnerabilities, peer groups become an important refuge, particularly among adolescents and talibés where these support networks are strongest.

6. CHILDREN'S RESPONSES: HORIZONTAL SOLIDARITY, FUTURE NARRATIVES

... horizontality or activating accessible connections

Solidarity between peers can express itself beyond young people's primary needs. In addition to food and health, youths are extremely concerned about clothing and wish to smoke, move about, drink tea, etc.

Hence, in Senegal, the end of the 1980s saw a trend to cut back the number of glasses of tea that were distributed from three to two. This adjustment aimed to reduce this expenditure, considered unessential within households. Gradually, the young people began to reevaluate the function of tea and realized that the longer the tea drinking lasts, the more it helps reduce feelings of hunger. Though trivial in its essence, tea-drinking becomes a space for sharing a similar condition: insufficient resources to access regular meals. During the 1990s, prolonging the time spent drinking tea together became a way to camouflage the difficulties faced in eating regularly. Within this context, more than before, drinking tea is the theatre for activating and constructing horizontal solidarity for groups of young townsmen (Fall, 2005).

Additionally, because of the high prices for clothing and other needs, young people of both genders adopt several forms for exchanging and pooling their holdings. The pair of second-hand or new shoes bought through the practice of taqale (Wolof for savings made up of receipts from several activities) becomes a common item potentially belonging to a social network in constant reshaping, the same as an outfit or other objects like tea kettles, etc. Someone outside of the group is unable to tell which shoes or pants belong to whom. This strategy allows young people to dress appropriately, especially when moving outside of the neighborhood, due to the varied support provided by group members. The same solidarity is practiced for cigarettes and alcohol consumption.

In similar circumstances it is common to see young people who feel confined in their own homes find a fairly permanent refuge at the homes of friends who have their own bedrooms. Moreover, when meals are not prepared everyday at home, young people will eat at their friends' homes. A similar example in Senegal is the tradition of "boolu dof,"[6] sought out by many young people one hour before retiring to sleep.

---

6 • In Senegal, the Wolof expression "boolu dof" literally means the "fool's bowl" (from the French bol du fou). This is a mixture of leftovers from a meal and was initially intended for the impoverished. The expression has been taken up again by young people to designate the dinner leftovers that they keep and eat very late at night. This is a strategy to avoid feeling hungry in the morning and having to eat breakfast. The ease in expression reveals the low demand for these leftovers which are nevertheless kept and mostly shared at the right time by the peer groups.

... new professions

Young people are increasingly conscious of their lack of training. Hence they strategically decide to take on apprenticeships in a trade to gain skills. They sometimes visit social assistance institutions to get professional counseling, and then receive training in various fields such as mechanics, masonry, tailoring, hair styling, etc. Given that the majority has not earned a classic diploma, their choices remain fairly limited and the direction they take does not always correspond to their deepest aspirations. They take anything that is offered, not based on a rationale of doing what one wants, but what one must, within the limited possibilities. Moreover, this orientation is based on gender relations, with specific trades reserved exclusively for boys and girls.

... making miracles: social success changes the trajectory

The values surrounding social success are reversed when confronted with the impossibility of fitting into the traditional process of maturation, or aging, (Spencer, 1990)—starting a family, obtaining and distributing income, raising children and possessing a house. Miracle makers emerge in the face of formal education's powerlessness. School is not experienced as a place that produces equality and affirmation of young people's creativity, where its end result would be a better life. This loss of credibility in the classic educational system renders it obsolete. Therefore, children are faced with new challenges due to the emergence of new values and figures of social success. Young people renounce the model of success based on extended study; they abandon the idea of building a career and professions. They are captivated by miracles that include games of luck, immigration, business and the secure incomes or spectacular successes gained through elite sports (football, basketball and wrestling) or popular music (show business).

For example, in Senegal numerous football schools have been established. These schools function with little potential, but they have had a lot of success with young people who aspire to become professional players. They attend these football schools with enthusiastic parental approval and gain respect from the entire community. The model of the professional football player and the wrestling champion has gradually leaned towards emulating the immigrant model.

Culture also constitutes another route, with the emergence of rap groups, dance companies, etc. One objective is to escape one's status of hailing from the "sleeping city" or "bush village" on the periphery. Children's and young people's willingness to express themselves (and consequently, their need to be heard) has been perceived in all sites. Besides the cultural activity's economic potential, it clearly appears to be an emancipating practice through which children and young people attain their individuality. Over the long-term, developing culture would be equivalent to promoting cultural tourism; this could become an industry capable of alleviating the crippling problem of unemployment. Rap groups can also be seen as rebellious communities, although they gain unanimous support among youths. They are actors for change in their environment, spokespersons who are responsible for denouncing all of society's ills, particularly those affecting young people.

... associativity to the rescue for children and young people

These parallel activities reveal a great desire for expression and often lead to the creation of an association or another group. However, most existing associations are structured and directed by an elite with the highest level of training. This elite cadre monopolizes material and financial resources while usurping the potential offered by the various partnerships with NGOs, local collectivities and technical structures. It negotiates for funding for projects and transforms them to the communities, often to their own advantage, while, in the end, excluding most of the citizens. This involves subverting the drive for autonomy that is the essence of associations. The challenge to support associations resides in these tensions between dynamics of expression, defense of interests[7] and individual appropriation of structures.

In summary, in spite of eroding solidarities and the limited possible horizons, young people innovate within and benefit from these gaps to better express their own identities (Biaya, 2000). Multiple identities are based on flexibility and social arrangements that recompose certain values and social links and claim membership in an entity of their own resulting from adaptations, resourcefulness and innovation. The following section is devoted to a specific response—mobility. Children's mobility poses a particular challenge in terms of citizenship and particularly illustrates children's and young peoples' capacities for adaptation and taking initiative but also their limits.

7 • Eme's analysis (2001:32) is extremely revealing in terms of associationism: "The association is a daughter, not only out of necessity but also through resistance to techno-instrumental rationales that deconstruct the collective frameworks of daily life."

7. MOBILITY: RESPONSES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILDREN

Mobility among young people and children is an old and effective tactic. It is a response that produces resources. It has an effect of redistributing and mobilizing various local and indigenous assets. The research documented concrete experiences of migration in Guinea Bissau and Niger: from one of the villages of Guinea Bissau to the fishing port of Joal Fadiouth in Senegal and from a Nigerien village towards Niamey and Accra in Ghana. Migration in these two countries has different histories. Predominantly boys and young men migrate.

… immediate gains polarize children and their elders

Reasons cited by migrants to explain migration have strong similarities: lack of work; local economies that are not significantly integrated and do not allow for acquiring necessary liquidity (the drop in price of the cashew nut is cited in Guinea Bissau, while in Niger, drought is the cause); and the lack of locally available services. In both cases, migration includes an educational and identity function: "knowing the world" or "becoming a man." Furthermore, migration allows for the development of self-esteem, positioning young males and boys as agents taking their fate in their own hands. Migration is often assimilated into the development of a masculine identity that conquers and explores. In both situations, the people who can count for migrants (their peers, potential companions, their partners and their nuclear family) value migratory enterprises and stigmatize those who stay behind.

Even more so in Guinea Bissau than in Niger, migration is an ongoing plan rather than a one-time strategy. Most young migrants see their move to Senegal as a step on the road that will eventually take them to Northern countries, passing through Cape Verde. The Nigeriens tend to settle and invest themselves in costal countries. It must be highlighted that mobility is secular and deeply anchored in the local imagination. Moreover, migration is fundamental in the oral histories describing the creation of present villages. These stories continue to be an essential part of the ethos of opening up to the world that globalization has only accentuated.

… do-it-yourself resources

Throughout their life trajectories, children and young people have recourse to various types of resources. For example, cell-phone technology enables migrants to keep their loved ones informed of their adventures and any possible trips or money transfers. As in other types of social activities, the considerable importance of peer groups has been noted, where mutual trust is effective and wagers protection. Other types of mobilized social capital include family (which always places children in a vulnerable position when they are far from their mothers or to a lesser extent, the nuclear unit), charity (generous individuals) and clientism. Naturally, it is essential that young people and children who are on the move develop a capacity for discerning the intentions of those on whom they depend and judge the situation they are in.

What is imagined about these migrations offers rich lessons. They comprise three main dimensions: (i) stigmatization of the village and bush (and naturally valuing the exterior, the other, the urban, elsewhere, etc.); (ii) individual responsibility since personal development depends on one's own capacities; and finally, (iii) an image of endurance and suffering. Such suffering is everyone's lot, while building endurance is an essential part of the up-bringing that children receive in all of the research sites. In daily life, children are often seen being subjected to violent or gratuitous interactions by adults. These behaviors are aimed at hardening children, to prepare them for a life of poverty and acceptance! This imagined world brings to mind the question: at what point are the issues of resource distribution between generations, social groups and territories in the various contexts (Sahelian in Niger and wet tropical in Guinea Bissau) essential?

The plan to emigrate is somehow supported and becomes a collective project. Mobilizing resources to make it happen is also carried out by a social group made up of the candidates' loved-ones (mother, neighbor, in-laws, friends, brothers and sisters). Resorting to mechanisms of self-restraint has become the rule. In the beginning, the child's entire social group mobilizes the candidate's resources and simultaneously takes on the risks inherent to the project. The task of obtaining economic means is shared and the risks of the enterprise are socialized.

8. UNDERLYING CHANGES IN CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

... young people attain their autonomy

Role taking has been observed among younger and younger children of both genders. The reasons are multiple and include the aspiration to attain autonomy when confronted with authority traditionally based on age and gender. Herein, the individualistic ideology remains present and functional. It structures and regulates numerous social tensions between groups. Young people refuse normative social relationships, often associated with a stigmatized past. They aspire to individual recognition. A dispute has been noted regarding the use of girls as family capital by heads of families, embodied by the dowry as exchange value for the girl. With individualization, using girls this way, or their reification, is becoming unacceptable for girls who intend to control their own bodies and fertility as they see fit.

Heads of families, conscious of their growing incapacity to control their children's bodies and behaviors, tend to absolve themselves of their responsibilities. Hence they avoid the "dishonor" of a pregnancy—which not only signifies loss of control by those responsible for educating the girl about sexuality, but also the loss of her exchange value. In the race for assets, heads of family do not hesitate to put their children to use as a source of income or to redistribute their responsibilities to others, or even to renounce their responsibility. This type of behavior is seen in confiage (foster care) and in matrimonial negotiations, without even permanently doing away with their primary obligation for social reciprocity.

The identity of elders rests on their capacity to affirm their power over their dependents and their ability to mobilize manpower within the framework of family economics. Changes in economies, in progress for several decades, are characterized by the monetization of both new and traditional goods and services (food, wood, water, etc.) that were previously obtained through authoritarian extraction. These transformations are also characterized by the desire to consume individually appropriated, or simply more tangible, goods. Such practices, caused by market forces, encourage monetization. The ever-increasing entrance of these societies into a broader reality (a physical process of reduced distances and an imaginary one linked to the perception that the world is one (Robertson, 1992)), guarantees the irremediable character of this phenomenon in everyone's eyes. Even if ownership of the non-human production factors (mainly land and equipment) continues to work under a system of seniority and gender, the human factors themselves are breaking free from their control.

Under these conditions, young people's tactics consist of taking initiatives much earlier and taking actions that distance them from the control of traditional society. Many parents experience school as an institution that causes this rupture. Yet other avenues for distancing exist: marrying and having children (through which they achieve social autonomy); migrating to physically distance oneself from the family; and embracing popular religious movements. Consequently, they frequently find themselves in situations that render them social outcasts, and face difficulties building a genuine social position within and/or outside of the family. Hence they find themselves pulled between adolescent possibilities and the responsibilities and physical expectation of adulthood.

To some degree, adults handle these transformations with relief and frustration. Pragmatism pushes them to actively support children and young people in their efforts to take charge, but it also pushes families to assume their responsibilities regarding their children. Support for children's and young people's efforts should involve the following factors: economics and children's production efforts; learning, which enables development and acquisition of knowledge (literacy, valuing indigenous knowledge and know-how, civic education, sex education, languages, etc.); the ability to analyze and reflect; social protection; and strengthening peer groups (affinity groups and naturally formed groups).

… disintegrating exchanges between generations

In all cases it has been noted that trans-generational mechanisms for protection have decayed and that responsibilities have been loaded on young people or more well-off members of the social network (often members of the extended family). This situation places young people in vulnerable situations. It takes on tangible dimensions, as affirmed by the number of children who bemoan having to feed themselves through their own means because they do not even receive a single meal a day in their homes.

The magnitude of the transformations that are required to understand the process of individualization is enormous. As horizons open to young people and children, references and values multiply. Children must navigate and build their lives while negotiating between the norms advocated by a community embodied by adults and those supported by tradition, also conveyed by rituals such as initiation. They must also navigate between the values advocated by the various religious movements, school, the State as well as those of NGOs and actors in the development world who are directed by considerations of universal rights. Somehow they must manage this without believing in brighter days to come. In light of the concrete life experiences of children and young people in the region, it clearly appears that seeing their reference unit in the "community"—understood as an aggregate of families within a territory—is completely erroneous. Young people flee the community and the specific power relations that have been reproduced there. Like most of their counterparts, they are building fragmented lives, made up of multiple communities of peers (real or imagined), and sharing interests, risks, values and aspirations.

… asserting one's rights, but where?

Awareness raising conducted by development actors and the penetration and success of cultural products mainly conveyed by modern media feed into this individualistic ideology and these increasingly fragmented lives. Even if aspirations for individuality, autonomy, self-reliance (rights) and responsibility are broadly shared, the available means and support for children and young people to attain them are quite ridiculous given the confrontational issues between the generations!

Children and young people are aware of their individual rights, but the services where they can assert these rights and obtain support and justice are absent. Children and young people are encouraged to get training, but school is expensive for all and not very effective for girls. At the same time, a major change is in process; however, in the current context of uncertainty and instability, this change is generally felt as negative: "There's a crisis."

... a political-economic environment in jeopardy

Support and actions to promote young people and children take their entire direction from a single, more encompassing context: the current forms of government in West Africa do not offer the so-called services. Due to reasons of failing institutional control, mechanisms for redistribution are stuck in patrimonialism and global economic imbalances that, in fact, deprive the very institutions that provide protection (for families by the State) the means to ensure their protection. This situation is intolerable and paradoxical. On the one hand, structures responsible for basic services are expected to meet their obligations, while on the other hand, neo-liberal ideology, the policies of liberalization that it produces and its armed institutional branches deprive these public entities the necessary resources to properly assume their roles.

Many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) question themselves and are challenged by intellectuals from the North and South (Abdullah, 2006) regarding their role in the current configurations. Ensuring basic services to children in the domains of education, health and social protection is obviously beneficial to communities. However, doesn't substituting for the State participate in the constant weakening of this very State? In other words, the current situation is misunderstood: this liberal and globalized world is far from the illusory system of Nation States belonging to the "natural" territories and ensuring the functions for protection, redistribution, security and justice. Social protection must be reinvented based on the abundant current practices observed in everyday life.

Outlying urban areas face their own social relegation. The urbanization process is marked by the social relegation of populations living on the peripheries of cities, where slums predominate. Lack of structured investments cause insecurity about the standard of living—a major factor in ghettoization and denying rights. This translates into what historians have quite precisely named the "burden of the State," in particular the autonomization of the Communes d'Arrondissement with no possibility to recover any fiscal means (delegation without means) and its consequence of generating a limited citizenry.

Transnational, public and private actors increasingly provide social functions and encourage development policies. However the question that naturally arises consists of knowing how collective interest remains a priority for these new arrangements for development. There is no immediate solution, but the actors' various dialogues need to be tied together; this involves taking initiatives and experimenting. It is important that children and young people be the central focus of these reflections, debates and initiatives. The "diagnosis" is not alarming; it aims to be realistic and to emphasize to what extent efforts must be pursued in terms of consultation, participation, learning and alliances; this is probably also true in terms of renovating the system of government.

Moreover, the extremely significant impact of climate change over the last two decades must not be underestimated. This challenge continues to be relevant. At a time when urbanization proceeds at a constant rate in Africa, particular efforts must be agreed upon regarding development of the rural world and its productive capacities. The failures of rural development, both from the viewpoint of production and commercialization, and the extremely serious and disturbing climate changes that have hit the region are central factors influencing lives within all communities.

CONCLUSION :
AN INTERVENTION TO PROTECT CHILDREN FOUNDED ON ACTIVE LISTENING

It often seems that the mechanical metaphor for social change, conceived through contrived positivist engineering, and characterized by heavy paternalism, always dictates NGO activities and programs and, to a great extent, those of other governmental institutions. We must dare to rethink these huge challenges and recognize that the creative dynamic of young people is concomitant with the reconsideration of numerous delegitimized institutions.

However, social change is a complex process that is uncontrollable and always in progress. Let us take some distance with the naïve belief that determined actions result in desired situations. Similarly, it appears that normative approaches are not realistic, requiring the implementation of rights and procedures that local authorities and institutions do not have the capacity to implement or that are so removed from day-to-day reality and local strategies for reproduction. These flawed and wishful attitudes result in mocking reality, which would be doomed to ineffectiveness and especially the exclusion of the oppressed whom one hopes to emancipate.

Even if the process of social change and our relative powerlessness are recognized, this does not mean resignation, but rather pragmatism and deep concern for the genuine and immediate well-being of children and young people. We must now work together to build the societies of tomorrow with real people living in the present. This is what the methods for listening and dialogue used in this research have set out to do, and this is why we continue to improve them.

A plurality of actors, all having different interests, works within the framework of child protection. These actor's diverse trajectories clearly show that not all communities are inclined to make the status of the child evolve in the same direction. However, messages from organizations that support development make no distinction in addressing these actors, who receive the messages differently, either distancing themselves from the messages or appropriating them, though not without reinterpreting them.

Children and young people are in a continuous quest for affirmation and recognition. They send out an un-censored public broadcast through "rappers" (hip-hop composers) who define themselves as the spokesperson for those who have been silenced. They claim the right to experimentation and innovation by creating spaces of creativity and cultural expression. They want to gain skills, develop knowledge, be informed and express themselves. Their peer networks must be extended, while communication between these networks and alliances with liberating groups must be pursued and amplified. Access to financial resources and, above all, legal and psycho-social support is essential, but depends greatly on the capacity of government entities to ensure these functions. It should be emphasized that these actions are only relevant within the framework of a continuous and broad dialogue between the various social groups identified by this research. For this, the process requires more interaction and respect between the different social groups.

The ideal plan for protecting children first leans on a vision for development that voluntarily promotes the gradual re-absorption of structural inequalities in the socio-economic arena as well as equitable access to common goods. Given the high rate of underemployment and the lack of

planning in resource allocation for young generations, entry into the workforce is included among the highest priorities. Yet, consequently, it has been proven necessary to promote support for associative dynamics and the development of institutions and strong local social policies. The new strategy for child protection must target social mobility. This involves lifting the constraints of inequality, ensuring quality services regardless of social categories and guaranteeing access to decent employment for young people. These elements constitute the three factors of social mobility, mobility being a central issue in the strategy for child protection.

It is important to further strengthen the synergies between the intervenors who are focused on children. Moreover, Plan International's actions must combine with community dynamics to promote the status of children, who must no longer be considered as a problem for society, but as a potential for creativity and life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abdullah, I. (2006). "State Incapacity and/vs. Transnational Governmentality: Scenarios and Effects of INGOs in West Africa." Plan International. WARO.

Auzanneau, M. (2001). Identités africaines : le rap comme lieu d'expression, Cahier d'Etudes Africaines, 163–164, XLI (3–4).

Behrendt, A. (2006). Tradition et droits. L'excision en Afrique de l'Ouest. Dakar : Plan International.

Biaya, T. (2000). "Jeunes et culture de la rue en Afrique urbaine (Addis-Abeba, Dakar et Kinshasa)". Politique africaine, n° 80 - December 2000

Blanc, A., Grant, M., and Mensch, B. (2005). "The changing context of sexual initiation in Sub-Saharan Africa." Working Papers, Population Council, No 206.

Bolle de Bal, M. (1985). La tentation communautaire - Les paradoxes de la reliance et de la contre-culture, Bruxelles: éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

Bonnet, M. (1993). "Le travail des enfants en Afrique". Revue Internationale du travail, vol. 132, no 3.

International Labor Organization (ILO). 1996. Le travail des enfants au Sénégal. Dakar: 149 p.

Bucholtz, M. (2002). "Youth and Cultural Practice." Annual Review of Anthropology. Vol 31 : 525–552.

Combier, A. (1994). Les enfants de la rue en Mauritanie : initiative de Bamako, L'Harmattan, 169 p.

Coquery-Vidrovith, C., Almeida-Tapor, H., Goerg, O., and Guitart, F. (under the direction of) (1992). Les jeunes en Afrique : Évolution et rôle XIX-XXe siécle (Volume 1). Editions L'Harmattan.

Dallape, F. (1988). Enfants de la rue, enfant perdus ? une expérience à Nairobi. Dakar: Enda Tiers Monde.

De Boeck, F. and Honwana, A. (2005). "Introduction: Children and Youth in Africa" In Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa F. De Boeck and A. Honwana (eds) (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2005).

Dédy, S. (1996). Problématique des enfants de la rue en Afrique : le cas de la Côte d'Ivoire. In: Renée B Dandurand, Roch Hurtubise and Céline Lebourdais (dir). Enfances. Perspectives sociales et pluriculturelles, Québec, IQRC.

Delaunay, V. (1996). "Le travail des fillettes en Afrique sub-saharienne. Conditions de vie et de travail des jeunes migrantes Sérère à Dakar.". L'enfant exploité, oppression, mise au travail, prolétarisation, sous la dir. de Schlemmer Bernard, Paris: Karthala, ORSTOM.

Deschamps, J.P., Erny P. and M'bede, J. (1989). La santé des adolescents et des jeunes, Revue du Centre International de l'Enfance, L'Enfant en milieu tropical, n° 180.

Diaw, C. (1991). "Stratégie de survie des enfants et des jeunes de la rue (approche psychosociologie)". Masters thesis in sociology, Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal

Diop, A-R. (2004). La carrière des adolescentes travailleuses dans les marchés urbains : une stratégie de survie contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion au Sénégal. Thèse de doctorat à présenter à l'Université du Québec à Montréal.

Diop, M. C. and Faye, O. (1997). Les jeunes, les autorités et les associations, in: Jeunes, culture de la rue et violence urbaine en Afrique, under the direction of Georg Hérault and Puis Adesanmi, Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA), Ibadan, p.147–213.

Diop, N. (1993). "La fécondité des adolescentes au Sénégal". Doctorate dissertation in demography, Montreal, University of Montreal, Canada..

Eme, B. (2001). Les associations ou les tourments de l'ambivalence, in : Association, démocratie et société civile, Laville J.L., Caillé A., Chanial P., Dacheux E., Eme B., Latouche S., (éds), Editions La Découverte/MAUSS/CRIDA, Paris, p. 27–58.

Enda Tiers Monde (1995). Enfants en recherche et en action : une alternative africaine d'animation urbaine, Dakar: Enda-Edition.

Enda Tiers-Monde (1993). Le travail des enfants au sénégal. Cas des « domestiques». Dakar: Enda-Editions.

Fall, A.S. (2005). Bricoler pour survivre. Perceptions de la pauvreté dans l'agglomération urbaine de Dakar, Bureau Grafische Producties, Amsterdam University.

Fall, A.S. alia (1995). Les familles dakaroises face à la crise, IFAN; ORSTOM; CEPED, Dakar/Paris.

Fall, A.S. alia (2005). Systématisation des actions de Plan pour faire émerger le potentiel des enfants et jeunes des cités urbaines : cas du Sénégal, IFAN ; Plan Senegal

Fall, A.S. Gueye Ch., (2005). Urbain-Rural. L'hybridation en marche. Enda Tiers-monde-APAD.

Fall, A.S. and Ndiaye, A.L. (2003). Analyse de la situation des adolescentes défavorisées dans les régions de Dakar et de Thiès, Unicef/UNFPA/IFAN/IRD, Dakar.

Galland, O. (1991). Sociologie de la jeunesse : L'entrée dans la vie adulte. Paris: Armand Collin.

Guèye, A. K. (1999). Etude sur le travail domestique non salarié des enfants – Unicef Senegal, December.

Haesevoets, Y-H.L. (1997). L'enfant victime d'inceste. De la séduction traumatique à la violence sexuelle, Bruxelles, De Boeck University.

Hérault, G. (1997). Jeunes, culture de la rue et violence urbaine en Afrique : invariants, paramètres et stratégies du changement, in: Jeunes, culture de la rue et violence urbaine en Afrique, under the direction of Georg Hérault and Puis Adesanmi, Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA), Ibadan, p.1–8.

ILO, (1996). Le travail des enfants au Sénégal. Dakar: International Labor Organization (ILO).

Lucchini, R. (1998). "L'enfant de la rue: réalité complexe et discours réducteurs." Déviance et société, vol. 22, no 4.

Marcoux, R. (1994). "Des inactifs qui ne chôment pas : Une réflexion sur le travail des enfants en milieu urbain au Mali." Travail, Capital et société, vol. 27, no 2.

Massart, G. (2006). "The convention of the rights of the child put to the test by the power relations in West Africa". in: The UN Children's Rights Convention: theory meets practice. Proceedings of the International Interdisciplinary Conference on Children's Rights, 18–19 May 2006, Ghent, Belgium. A. Ang, I. Delens-Ravier, M. Delplace, C. Herman, D. Reynaert, V. Staelens, R. Steel, and M. Verheyde (eds.). Antwerpen; Intersentia

Massart, G. (2004). "Masculinités pour tous ? Genre, pouvoir et gouvernmentalité au Cap-Vert. Le foyer dans la spirale de l'ouverture et du changement à Praia." in Revue Lusotopie. XII (1–2). Mar.–Apr. 2004. 245–262

Mbaye, M. and Fall, A.S. (1996). Un tissu social qui se délite, un système qui se fragilise, in l'enfant exploité. Oppression, mise au travail, prolétarisation, Bernard Schlemmer (Dir.), Kartthala-Orstom.

Ndao, M. (1987). Enfants et jeunes de la rue dans la commune de Dakar: problématique de l'animation de la rue [Mémoire en service social]. Sénégal: École Nationale des Assistants et Educateurs spécialisés

Ndione, E., Sagna, M., and Bugnicourt J. (1987). Pauvreté ambiguë: enfants et jeunes au Sénégal. Unicef-Enda ed. Dakar.

Robertson, R. (1992). Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture. London: Sage.

Sall, F.K.N. (1999). Le travail des enfants et le programme IPEC au Sénégal. Dakar: International Labor Organization (ILO).

Sarr, F. L'enquête sur les enfants de la rue à Thiès et à Mbour (Unicef, 1999), in analyse de la situation des enfants au Sénégal, 2002, Save the Children

Spencer, P. (1990). The Riddle of the Sphinx: Paradoxes of Change in the Life Course. London & New York: Routledge.

UNICEF and Enda Tiers-Monde (1996). Les Mbindaan sans Mbindou, les petites bonnes à Dakar. Dakar: International Labor Organization (ILO).
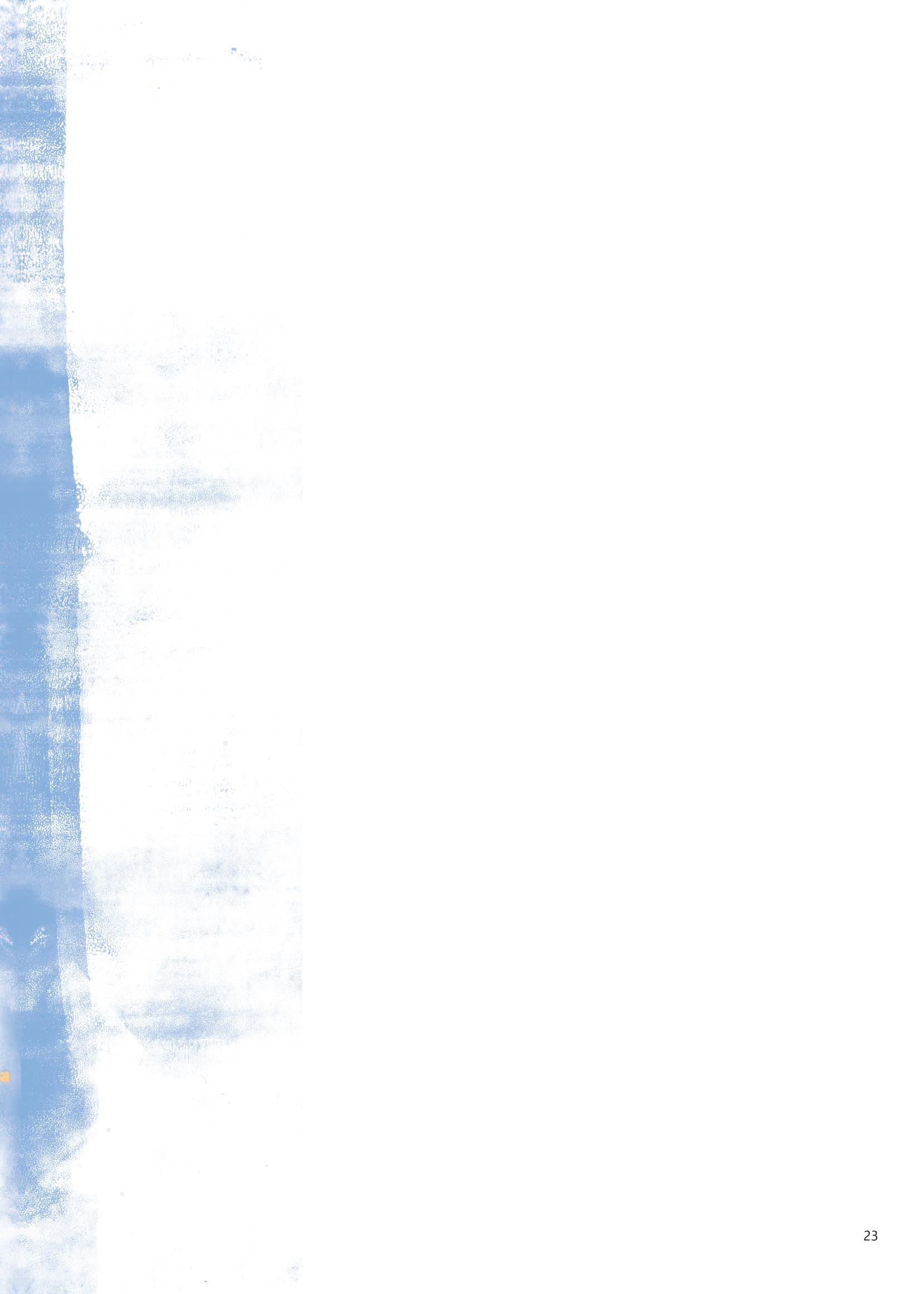
Plan International
mars 2007
www.reactions-africa.org