

# The 2011 Hokenstad International Lecture

## Global North and Global South in Child Welfare *Actors in Research and Implementation*

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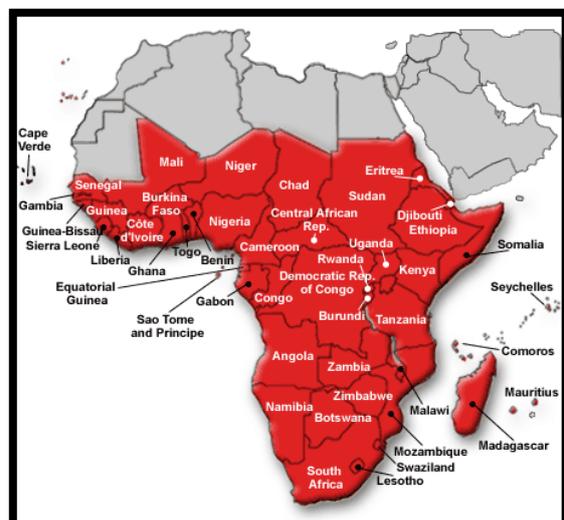
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I come from another corner of the world, from Sweden in Europe to this corner of the United States, to discuss involvement in a third corner of the world: the so-called Sub-Saharan Africa, or perhaps I should say the Global South in general. Today, I want to share my views on common challenges, regardless of where in the world we are producing research. I will touch on the intricate relationship between research and its practical implications and the interactions between researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

My main questions are formulated within the basis of my own area of interest, specifically, child welfare. For many years I have been involved with children in international contexts, especially children in poverty areas, in countries that we sometimes categorize under the umbrella term “Global South.”

It has been estimated that every year, depending on the generosity of different donors, from 47 million to more than 500 million USD is spent on child welfare research in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mweru & Ng’asike, 2007).

This part of Africa, with a population of some 800 million inhabitants, is the most poverty encumbered corner of the world; 50% of children here are younger than 15 years of age. More than 70% of the rural population lives in absolute poverty. African children are the most disadvantaged in the world, with very limited chances for success in life; they are exposed to violence, HIV/AIDS infection, numerous diseases, and



malnutrition and have little access to education. Here we find the lowest life expectancy in the world (in many countries, fewer than 50 years of life expectancy, and in Angola as little as 38 years; Mweru & Ng'asike, 2007). Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region of the developing world where child mortality has increased (Macassa, Hallqvist, & Lynch, 2011). Considering that some of the countries in this region have the lowest GDP in the world, it is understandable that child welfare research funding depends on external resources (Mweru & Ng'asike, 2007).

My questions today concern how research is conducted with children in their context, and by whom? What kind of research? Which content? How is the research implemented? By whom? So far, we can say that these questions are universal.

Additional questions today concern the Global South, with a special focus on Africa. These are questions that we should ask ourselves more frequently in the Global North academic communities: Who is financing the research? Who defines the research questions? Where are the results published? I ask these questions because they are of special importance for the Global South countries.

My point of departure is that research within this territory is necessary, and that it is preferably designed, conducted, and reported by scientists who are recruited locally.

My thesis is that there is a risk that research from the Global North subjects local resources to exploitation—by using the Global North's superior material resources; by monopolizing the research questions; by using the results to promote the researchers' own careers; and by neglecting practice and policy implementation.

From the perspective of the Global South we need to ask ourselves whether these are relevant accusations. Is the knowledge bank of Global South researchers being subjugated, as they claim?

### **Sources Underpinning My Analysis**

- While I was on its board, the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries initiated, with Child Watch International, an investigation of the conditions for research in Sub-Saharan Africa. Three African research groups delivered a report for a symposium held in Stockholm in 2007 (Hessle, 2007). This report is my main source for the analysis to follow.
- Second, I use a report from an evaluation done by a Norwegian institute on Swedish and Norwegian engagement in child welfare/child protection projects in the Global South (Tostensen, Stokke, Trygged, & Halvorsen, 2011).

- Third, increasingly I find colleagues involved in evaluations of development projects in Global South countries. This evidence-based projects fever of our time, which even earlier in history contaminated developmental initiatives in the Global South, is reflected in the current inflation of evaluations of methods in social work in the Global North. My own experience of this situation underscores the tendencies I find among my other sources for this analysis.
- Finally, I include among my sources some international articles on the subject.

### **Categories for the Analysis**

I have already mentioned the four categories in which I have organized the data: the material conditions for establishing research; the negotiations that lead to formulation of research questions in an agenda; the process of publishing the results internationally; and the follow-up on implementation of the results.

### **Main Actors in Global South Research and Implementation**

Before we go into the reports from the African groups, we should make a distinction between three main actors involved in research in the Global South: Global North scientists, Global Action scientists, and Global South scientists.

Global North scientists are generally established researchers whose research platform is the academic environment. Quite common is the bilateral academic relationship between two universities or research departments, permitting the exchange of research projects with graduate and postgraduate students involved.

Global Action scientists are established researchers whose research platform is the leading international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). I call it “global action” within this contextual framework to include those organizations with clear objectives for action. Their work is to discover, analyze, and implement. This in turn means that one important characteristic of these organizations is their closeness to stakeholders. Their action-orientation and advocacy-orientation will evidently result (or should result) in policies. Within the territory of child welfare, many NGOs claim to have research capacity, which in most cases means that they evaluate their own actions. Large so-called IGOs (i.e., international government organizations) can include their own research administrations, such as the United Nations agencies UNICEF, the World Health Organization, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, and the International Labour Organization, which finance and conduct research in the child welfare area (Axford, in press).

Global South scientists are locally established academics conducting research in poverty stricken regions. The research programs are mainly formulated in universities and research institutions or centers.

Table 1 summarizes the main child welfare research actors and their agencies of origin, classified in the categories Global North, Global Action, and Global South. I combine them in the table with the categories for the forthcoming analysis.

**Table 1. Summary of Child Welfare Research Actors**

Agency Origin	Material Resources	Definition of Research Agenda	Int. Publication of Results	Policy Implementation	Risk
Global North					
Global Action					
Global South					

### **Basic Conditions for Research on Child Welfare in Sub-Saharan Africa**

I now turn to the documentation of research activities in Sub-Saharan Africa with the main source being the three reports, and I will include my impressions from the other sources mentioned earlier. How is research conducted with child welfare in this part of the world, what is the content, and by whom is it reported?

The researchers who reported to the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries made a very detailed study of the research documentation in their region of Africa. Their mission was difficult due to the heterogeneous, sprawling, and varying quality and sources of the information. Through document reviews, interviews, and surveys, the researchers have summarized 10 years of child welfare research in their part of the world. Here, we can only share a summary of the summaries.

Let us first note that the analysis of more than a hundred reported and published research publications during the time frame of 10 years shows that the projects are widespread with few or no connections between. When we add the research activities that are published from NGOs, such as Global Action, the impression of a split population of research projects is reinforced. And most of the NGO projects are not reported through international scientific publications; these reports end up in the hands of the donors.

The researchers comment that child research funds depend largely on donor funding from industrialized governments and international agencies (Axford, in press). Basic funders are the United States and governments in Northern Europe. More than a hundred listed international nongovernment agencies add to the impression of the domination of the North over the South. Governments from sub-Saharan countries contribute very modestly, with what might be considered “pocket money,” to child welfare research. The researchers comment further that this uneven division of money for child welfare research, of course, is a demonstration of the power relationship between rich and poor. “African countries may not be capable of establishing strong institutions for research in child development,” the researchers conclude, and therefore, research will be externally driven in line with the research design policy of international bodies (Axford, in press, p. 39).

But what is the child welfare research all about?

The funding priorities are focused mainly on Millennium Development Goals and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) with issues of health as number one, with HIV/AIDS and malaria projects predominant. Other prioritized areas are research on education, poverty reduction, and nutrition. These seem to be urgent themes to focus on, of course. But the comment from our authors is interesting, that the funds are directed toward focus areas that describe the African child as “vulnerable.” The authors conclude that “the image of the African child is distorted,” (Axford, in press, p 40), and they recommend giving priority to studies of the resilience of the children in Africa!

Moreover, this kind of monopolizing of the agenda to crisis themes tends to leave out the lives of the children living under normal circumstances. The authors call for research projects that respect what they term “cultural specific situations.” One example they mention is the failure to take into consideration different perspectives on children and young people in the African context. Many projects studied did not even note the age of the children involved or used only the UNICEF definition of a child as being a person under the age of 18.

CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), situated in Dakar, Senegal, is an organization for the promotion of African research and publication. This organization is more precise in its critique of the existing research in the area of child welfare. After having listed approximately 15 research programs as being of prime importance, CODESRIA concludes that the contextual factors defining the framework for marginalization of youth in society are underexplored.

These factors are political, economic, social and demographic in nature and they speak to broader processes of transition and change in society that have impacted adversely on children and the youth... new factors connected with accelerated processes of urbanization that have generally gone hand-in-hand with the expansion of the boundaries of the informal sector, deepening of social inequalities in the context of the collapse of social policy, increased migratory flows within and across borders, and the massive and accelerated refraction of global processes and trends into local contexts, have emerged into significance and closer attention. (CODESRIA, 2007, p. 31)

The disciplinary background of child welfare researchers in the Global North is quite diverse and more subdivided in comparison with those from the Global South; for example, project involvement comes from departments of microbiology, public health, community health, medicine, political economy, pharmacology, anthropology, law, dentistry, education, geography, and even a few representing sociology and social work. Their counterparts in the Global South tend to be located in academic institutions with multidisciplinary teams including experts mainly from the field of health. Moreover, child welfare research was also found to be included in broader fields of studies, such as in university departments of economics, development studies, pediatrics, and agriculture, where the main subject might be poverty alleviation. The authors of the report I am referring to seem to be triggered by this interdisciplinary collaboration of researchers in the field of child welfare: "The involvement of individuals from different disciplines in child research provided an opportunity to make use of different insights on African children and also on research more generally" (CODESRIA, p. 50).

CODESRIA's conclusion regarding the analysis of the African research notes that

it is important to shift the balance and invest in understanding the lives and situation of the normal African children in order to establish

standards of well-being that have relevance and meaning in the context of the African child. (CODESRIA, p. 45)

The NGOs walk hand-in-hand with the research institutions from the Global North, in their way of spending resources and defining the agenda. As international watch dogs their focus, of course, is on vulnerable children, the children at risk. Their job is both to be close to and support children affected by different kinds of disasters and to advocate and educate for CRC with children in normal circumstances as well as children at risk. The research that is connected to this world of Global Action could be characterized as big surveys and small evaluation projects. NGOs usually work closely with government bodies and stakeholders in the communities and thus have an opportunity to influence policy development for the children, at least in the short term.

There are few if any connections between these kinds of projects and local or international universities or research centers, and the scientific reports as a rule are not published in international peer-reviewed journals; the results remain with the donors. And the results are owned by the donor, which means that the researchers involved get no scientific credit for their work to add to their personal CVs to advance their academic careers. The highly influential Global Action agencies, such as UNICEF, have developed a quite advanced system for defining scientific concepts and disseminating social methods for the practice of child welfare/child protection around the world. This is often done with a qualified network of international experts, recruited from both practice and academic home bases. But how often have these important steps become part of the academic discourse?

When considering the publication of child welfare research, scientists from the Global North are obviously in a winning position. Quite a lot of the research is financed by grants given to fund PhD and master's theses "which then end up lying on the shelves of the dean's office" (Mweru & Ng'asike, 2007, p. 39). Mweru and Ng'asike (2007) conclude that "data generated by students is never used to address SSA children's problems, thus research funds are wasted" (p. 39). Moreover, Global South researchers go a step further and ask their Global North colleagues why the scientific work carried out by scientists in the South is ignored by the scientific communities in the developed countries? "The only exception is when these research works have been carried out on instructions from individuals in the North" (Mweru & Ng'asike, 2007, p. 38). So, if local scientists from the Global South are to have a chance to be published in peer-reviewed journals, it has to be in connection with their colleagues in the Global North. And, considering the money spent on research programs, we have

to conclude that the results are far from acceptable. Over a 10-year period the average number of published articles is 10 a year. Dominating are health and medicine journals; a third of the articles were published in journals covering these disciplines. There were very few articles published in social science journals or journals specializing in child welfare issues (Mweru & Ng'asike, 2007).

### Summary

To summarize the analysis, let us update Table 1 and complete it with answers to the key questions that I asked at the beginning (see Table 2).

1. There is no doubt about the power relationship between the Global North and the Global South. The material resources for child welfare research are distributed from the North to the South. The South invests very few resources on its own. We understand this inequality in resource distribution from the South as a consequence of the fact that the nations in sub-Saharan Africa are in one of the poorest regions in the world. So in Table 1, to categorize the answer to the question of resource contribution as “yes” or “no,” the answer for the Global North is “yes,” for Global Action it is “yes,” and for the Global South it is “no.”

**Table 2. Child Welfare Research – Risks and Challenges**

Agency Origin	Material Resources	Definition of Research Agenda	Intl. Publication of Results	Policy Implementation	Risk
Global North	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	EXPLOITATION
Global Action	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	COLONIZATION
Global South	No	No	No	No	SUBJUGATION

2. It does not follow that an uneven resource distribution is dominating and influencing the areas of research studies. But we found evidence that the research agenda is determined by the main donors, regardless of whether they are governments, research foundations, universities, or international

agencies. So in Table 1, if our question concerns the influence of the direction of research on children, the answer for the Global North would be “yes”; for Global Action, “yes”; and for the Global South, “no.”

3. When considering the publication of results of the research, we found remarkably little scientific evidence of the research, at least in terms of the money spent and the number of scientific articles published. Local scientists have to collaborate with colleagues from the North to be published in the peer-reviewed journals of the North. Global Action research seems to be invisible, hidden away in the desks of the donors.
4. Finally, when concerning the implications of the results, we called for a larger presence of Global North scientists in child welfare research implementation. We are aware that this is a universal problematic phenomenon. Implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa seems to have been monopolized by agencies outside the universities, the Global Action donors. Global South researchers seem to have the same kind of implementation problems as those in the Global North despite being objectively closer to the local civil society than even the Global Action agencies. A possible explanation is that being without a material resource base for research, not having a part in deciding content during research project planning, and not participating in the international publication of the research results makes them outsiders with respect to policy implementation. There is a term that well-describes the position of the researchers from sub-Sahara: *subjugated*.

### Conclusion

We are coming back to my initial statements. I claimed that there is a risk that the research from the Global North subjects local resources to exploitation

- by using superior material resources,
- by monopolizing the research questions,
- by stealing the results for own careers, and
- by neglecting practice and policy implementation.

I think my review supports this statement, and we can add “exploitation” to the list of risks in Table 1.

When the scientists in the agencies of Global Action are in focus, they seem to be in the same position as their colleagues at the universities of the Global North—they sit on the resources and the research agenda—but we found no existing academic

dialogue of the results in scientific publications. They are closely connected to the local governments and stakeholders, so whatever the results of the evaluations, the Global Action scientists implement (or should implement) their results as policies. But because transparency is lacking, there is an obvious risk of colonization through Global Action (see Hessle, 2007).

### **The Way Forward—Three Appeals**

At the beginning of this talk I proposed that research within this territory is necessary, and that it should be designed, conducted, and reported by scientists who are recruited locally. It is obvious through this review that the basic conditions for research production are far from acceptable in the Global South (at least in Sub-Saharan Africa). Adding to these shortcomings is the migration of researchers from the South to the North, leaving the Global South with insufficient scientific capacity. In other cases those who return after postgraduate studies in the North are burdened by teaching classes at the university, with little or no time for their own research. It is urgent that we contribute to their scientific capacity-building in the area of child welfare research.

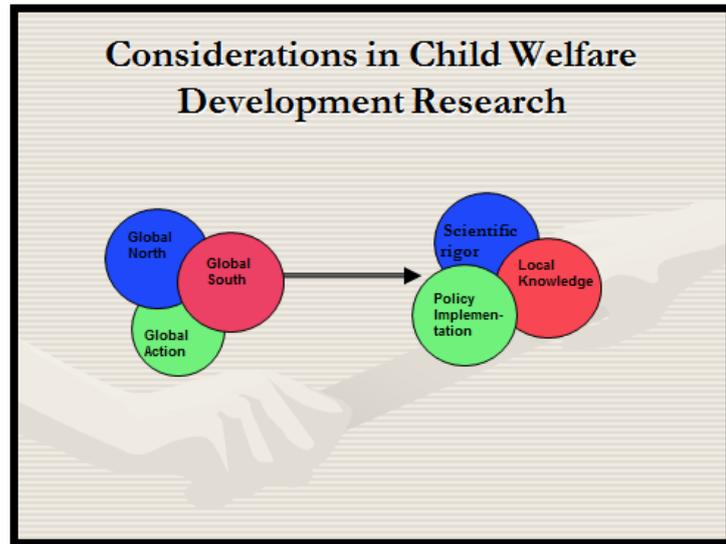
And why should not social work/social welfare be main contributors, given that our subject is academic and is practice- and policy-directed? Being close to children is one of the fundamentals of our profession. Why are so few of us part of research capacity-building in the Global South?

Following are some practical recommendations based on the analysis so far, when considering child welfare research and practice in the Global South. I summarize them in three appeals:

- *Build up a critical mass of child welfare researchers in Global South.* One researcher in a university department is not enough. An optimal research environment needs enough researchers in a unit to establish, preserve, and expand the conditions for research in a research territory of interest! A critical mass of researchers would be able to establish exchanges with colleagues and other research groups, even outside the country. And they would attract new cadres of young researchers. Related needs include communication qualifications in ICT and foreign languages to keep abreast of the development of the state of the art and the scientific community at large; access to competence in qualitative and quantitative methodology, scientific theory, and the reporting of results in scientific articles; and regular seminars for discussing research projects in various stages of completion. An optimal

research environment has competent teachers in undergraduate education, enabling students to learn the conditions for research and the significance of research for their own institution and for the world at large. This could mean that students and teachers can visualize an academic career at their own institution of learning.

- *Establish peer mentorship between the Global North and the Global South.* It follows from the first appeal that much support is needed in child welfare research for the establishment of optimal research conditions in the academic world of the Global South. Besides the need for material



support, the need for mentorship and coaching is obvious. Mentorship is not a new concept in the Global South; it is practiced among all actors that we have mentioned here. We might emphasize the special needs of special-directed peer mentors regarding publishing articles in academic journals.

- *Establish collaboration between the knowledge banks of the Global North, the Global South, and Global Action.* It is obvious that Global Action researchers are more successful than their colleagues in North and South universities in implementing their results as social policy, which might be partly explained by their closeness to practice and stakeholders. Even if the research from Global Action is less in focus for critical academic discussions, there is much to learn from their engagement with children at risk. An increased engagement in supporting a holistic view of children, which the Global South is advocating for, could be a road to acknowledging the local knowledge bank of the Global South.

In closing, I am aware that what I have presented here today could be considered an example of circular reasoning: I claim that researchers from the Global South are subjected to exploitation by their colleagues in the Global North, and I find in my review—not surprisingly—that they are being exploited!

This critique might be unfair, because I am aware that there are many examples of successful collaborations between Global North and Global South scientists. But I cannot ignore the cries for help from colleagues in the South: Support us, don't subjugate us!

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