

taking stock of children globally

In the middle of 1989 Jinny Rickards, Director of Grassroots Educare Trust, spent her long leave attending three major international conferences concerned with children's issues. Here she answers questions put by Shona Bagley about her impressions of the position of children globally.

What was the first stop on your round-the-world conference marathon?

The Helsinki Congress on Children's Rights was particularly important from a networking point of view. I was one of four South Africans among approximately 300 delegates from 59 countries. The conference was primarily organised by Defence for Children International (DCI), a non-governmental organisation which promotes children's rights. It focused on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international legal instrument which will be binding on those who ratify it. The result aimed at is to heighten consciousness all over the world of the plight of the child, by looking at a philosophy for the child; the behaviour of adults in relation to children; and the integration of the Convention into existing juridical practice.

You mentioned networking. What exactly do you mean by that?

The South African delegates (two of whom represented the Cape Town Free the Children Alliance) concentrated on pooling our resources with and tapping the knowledge of our African counterparts: delegates from Ethiopia, Tanzania, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Botswana. This opportunity reminded me afresh of the dangers of isolation for South Africans. From the point of view of the progressive democratic movement, it was important to remind delegates that the apartheid war in South Africa is not a black/white war. It's a progressive/reactionary one. Many delegates were surprised to find that there are progressive white South African women! An Ethiopian woman, who became a friend, on being introduced to me exclaimed, 'I've never met one of those before!'

What impressions did you gain from these contacts?

I was perturbed that people seemed not yet to have fully internalised the realities of the economic disaster that is Africa. In my opinion there was still an overarching sense of unrealistic expectations - a misplaced optimism that everything is going to be all right for the children of a free Africa. And I don't think there is **anything** in the statistics to back that up. The problem of scale is so overwhelming in the entire continent that alternative solutions are drastically needed if the situation is to be salvaged at all. There are the problems of children dying in their hundreds of thousands when they could be saved by simple and inexpensive measures. Measures like vaccine, oral rehydration and breastfeeding which don't require only qualified doctors, but also willing community health people and inspired strategy. It's a moral commitment on the part of governments that's needed, and a coherent international body of thought.

No signs of hope?

I wouldn't say that. There is a growing awareness of the issues, a new willingness to act on children's behalf. There are pockets of innovative thought on children's rights all over the world, including in Africa.

Perhaps the paralysis of being caught between Departments of Education and those of Health and Welfare, or their national equivalents - 'professional apartheid' - is the biggest brake on progress in provision for young children. It's prevalent in almost every country in the world. There is a **radical** difference between kindergartens and nursery schools which were created for middle-class children, and 'daycare', generally welfare-run and

suffering from an acute lack of resources, which was simply noses-and-bums stuff for poor children. And that has filtered from the First World into the Third World. This inheritance of differentiation is a major problem we're facing. Middle-class privileges get entrenched while the poor get poorer, and it all gets translated into governmental terms. Around the world education authorities run nursery schools and kindergartens, and health and welfare authorities run daycare, all for the same child - jealousy, turf battles, etc.

Does all this apply equally to South Africa?

Of course - but here it's exacerbated by the racist apartheid system. We have separate departments of Education and of Health and Welfare for the separate House of Representatives, House of Delegates, House of Assembly. **And**, for black Africans, the Departments of Education and Training and of Development Planning, not to mention Provincial Administrations, RSCs, homeland governments and so on. Add to this the different interest groups, each with its own agenda, within these bodies. The cost in terms of wasted time is staggering, let alone the unjust allocation of resources. Every day, all those vested interests are reducing our children's chances.

And so, in sum?

There are no comprehensive plans in the Third World or the First to meet the needs of children. And preschoolers are always at the bottom of the pile since what resources there are, are always allocated first to the formal school years. Most countries have got around to some sort of formal education policy, but not many

have really considered the years before that.

A feature of the second conference I attended, in London (Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Prescolaire, OMEP), was an exception that gave us all hope. The New Zealand government, in the light of economic recession, set up a commission to investigate education expenditure. The commission recommended and is implementing cut-backs at tertiary, secondary and primary levels of education but, unbelievably, is stepping up expenditure at preschool level as being the best investment for their society's growth and development. What is more, the health, education and welfare of New Zealand's young children is all to fall under one comprehensive authority. It was a moving moment - a highlight of the trip, in fact. Most of us couldn't believe that one nation on earth had finally seen the importance of the first six years and worked out a logical solution.

What was your next stop?

I was the guest of the Canadian South Africa Education Trust Fund for two weeks. An acute case of 'professional apartheid' has separated what is provided for young children in the school system from a nation-wide daycare movement whose concerns include a high quality education programme for children from birth to school entry; the reality of working parents and poor children; and the importance of para-professional teaching personnel and parental involvement, i.e. the Real World!

One of the most interesting aspects of my Canadian fortnight was being invited to observe a day-long meeting of North America's top First Nations educators at the University of British Columbia's First Nations House of Learning. So strange to be in a society where assimilation is the policy and separatism is seen by some as the only vehicle to retain 'own culture'!

How do parents feature in all of this?

A point which recurred in the various conferences was the importance of parents' involvement with education. As soon as children get into the for-

mal school system, that vital influence is shut out. And this is true as much of Canada, Britain and America as it is of South Africa. The parent is the prime educator, and the person who is **bound** to have the child's best interests at heart. Therefore, parents should have a say in who teaches and cares for their children; what they are taught; and how they are taught and cared for. Early childhood educare should begin from where children and their parents are at. It should be culturally appropriate in terms of the children's experience and background. This is not to absolve the state of the obligation of providing educare facilities for all young children needing them, preferably through a local-authority infrastructure. In the Third World, especially, I feel it would be a massive step forward to marry local government accountability with parental accountability: to break down the distance between the child and the state by getting the control of education as close to the community as possible. This would circumvent problems like curricula being imposed from above, and filtered through many levels.

Let's move on to the Conference for Early Childhood in Hong Kong

This was my first experience of the East and the challenges of enormous populations. The tensions of the post-Tiananmen Square period were tangible in the meetings of delegates from mainland China and other South-East Asian countries.

For me this conference was pivotally important because for the first time, I met a group of - mostly UNICEF - people thinking about policy and strategies to address the questions of provision on a large scale. My new-found colleagues included the UNICEF representative in Beijing with whom I'd played squash while at UCT in the late '50s!

My last stop was Bangkok where my most interesting encounter was a 7 am breakfast with a UNESCO staffer who has been working with refugees throughout Asia for 20 years. I was

dismayed to hear him state the opinion that over 90% of international refugee aid is paternalistic and undermines the development process by ignoring the real leadership in the camps and by keeping people dependent. As with these adults, so with children around the world: our task is to empower them and their parents. □



Young boy in Thailand, August 1989.