

# Issues in Child Development in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *This research work focused on issues in child development in Nigeria. The study reviewed definitional issues in child development, looking at who a child is, and what makes one a child using international children's right laws and Nigeria in particular. The study also mentioned that children should be seen as rights-possessors and not just as objects of adult control and domination and that children welfare is not limited to the physical, but is wholesome, including religious/spiritual welfare, educational welfare, emotional welfare and any other form of welfare a child can get to enhance development. The study also stated that the government should bring up good children right policies that will protect the interests of children.*

**Keywords:** Child Development; Children's Rights; Childhood; Gender

## 1. Who is a Child?

It is generally assumed that a child is a person under the age of 18. This assumption may be based on the fact that the core human rights conventions place this ceiling regarding the age of a child. Examples can be taken from the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 as well as the African Union's Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (CRWC). Article I and Article II of both treaties state a child is a person under the age of 18. This is also the case with Nigeria's Child's Rights Act 2003. Section 277 of the Act has the same age restriction regarding the child. Other Nigerian laws follow the same path. The 1999 Constitution allows a person who is 18 to participate in voting in elections; due to this provision, some argue that adulthood starts at 18. However, this position must be taken with caution. Other laws vary this age upwards or downwards. For example, in contractual relations, the age of contractual capacity is raised to 21. In family welfare issues such as custody, maintenance, property readjustments following divorce, persons who are 21 and less may have these welfare orders made in their favour. On the other hand, the Nigerian Companies and Allied Matters Act 1990 allows a person who is under the age of 18 to join in the formation of a company and to become a member of a company. Our Criminal laws reduce the age of criminal responsibility to as low as 12. For marriage, persons who are less than 21 may be able to marry as far as they obtain parental consents or the consents of some other authorized persons.

All said, when we wish to discover who a child is, we must look at the area of concern and relevant laws. This viewpoint is important in child development issues. We know that many of our children do not really become independent until much into adulthood. Many of our children attend schools up to the age of 22 or 25 these days. Even when they complete basic education or even tertiary education, many do not become self-reliant until much later. We can add the reality of our children with special needs and care. Therefore, we must project an inclusive definition of a child due to these socio-economic realities.

## 2. What is the proper view of children?

There may be two or three views of children which are possible. In the home, children may be viewed as property of parents. This will justify parental power by reference to some sort of *paternalism*. Such a view will regard parents as owners and will justify whatever parents do with children in the name of their protection. This view is stronger when children are in their tender years. Another possible view of children in the home sees children as members of a community (a kind of mini-state) with individual interests which must be protected. All the same, the view regards parents as capable, and as heads of this community, allows them to hold power as agents or trustees on behalf of the children. This will be stronger when the children become adolescents.

Outside the home, a common image of the child is the child as "victim" of adult domination. This is usually a public's view of children. Children may also be viewed, especially by government authorities, as "deprived" and "depraved." The other two images constitute a shared view by the government and the home: those which see the child as *threat* (especially adolescents) and the child as *investment* (leaders of tomorrow and a nation's future). Therefore, modern commentators assume that the primary justification for the existence of parental rights and powers is to be found essentially in terms of *child protection and control*. Children are viewed as being incapacitated in law because they do not have the maturity required to order their own lives and participate in political life. This is justified by reference to lack of rationality and capacity to form coherent purposes or lack of understanding and experience. As a result, children are still regarded as being in such a state as to require being taken care of by others and must therefore be protected against their own actions as well as external injury. In order that children may be so protected and nurtured out of their state of disability, rights are given to parents.

However, these views have (and should) changed. The image of the child as just a vulnerable "victim" in socio-legal and popular discourse is now giving way to a different image of the child: that of the autonomous, responsible child. This is a blended paradigm that sees the child as both

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an autonomous social actor and a vulnerable object of concern. Rather than seeing childhood as a “biologically determined” and universal stage, which is characterized by incompetence or irrationality, and through which all children must pass on their way to completion as autonomous adults, it is seen as a socially construed space or as a variable concept. This is different from the conception of children as inactive moulds of clay to be formed by socializing agents, by nature or by structural forces over which they have no control. It sees children not just as outcomes of social processes but as actors within them in relation to the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.” Within this kind of paradigm, it becomes possible to ascribe to children the characteristics of reflexivity and agency and to see them as participants in the project of individualization. In this paradigm, children have the capacity to exercise a form of agency, a type of post-liberal autonomy, and to affect and influence their environment, conditions, attachments, detachments and self-identity. More than this, they should attract an increasing degree of responsibility for doing so.

Generally, therefore, the *rights* and *powers* which are conferred on parents are, those of physical control and the regulation of everyday life which goes with that control, and it is not strictly necessary to imply anything further.

### Child Development and Child Welfare

Child’s welfare describes the ingredients of or the components of a child’s wellbeing. It is to be understood comprehensively, embracing material, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, and so far as it admits of assessment, spiritual well-being. Where these aspects of a child’s welfare are catered for, it contributes to and constitutes a positive and complete development of the child. This has long been recognized as realistic. As far back as 1893, Lord Lindley of the United Kingdom House of Lords said:

*The welfare of the child is not to be measured by money only, nor by physical comfort only. The word welfare must be taken in its widest sense. The moral and religious welfare of the child must be considered as well as its physical well-being. Nor can the ties of affection be disregarded.*

These aspects of the child’s welfare are to be regarded as interacting with each other so as to constitute a totality. It is an error to concentrate on one to the exclusion of the others. Therefore, evaluating a child’s welfare and development involves taking into account a wide range of considerations which capture the different aspects of a child’s wellbeing. They are usually categorized as follows:

#### 1) **Material Needs**

This includes the minimum conditions for supporting survival. This should comprise of sufficient satisfaction of simple needs of food, clothing and housing and ancillary materials. Non-existence of these may amount to neglect.

#### 2) **Physical and Emotional Welfare**

The child’s emotional welfare focuses on the quality of the particular relationships which need to be formed with the child. We can talk of a healthy relationship

between a child and both parents, neighbours, relatives, teachers as well as other children in the neighbourhood.

#### 3) **Moral Welfare**

Due to absence of consensus in accepted standards of conduct and pluralism in moral matters, particularly in sexual matters, the proper content and response of law from the standpoint of the child’s welfare is problematic. Despite this, the moral welfare for a child concentrates attention on avoiding actual, or prospective, moral harm to the child. The African culture has a minimum base of acceptable behaviour. Time must be spent with the child inculcating these moral values whether they are derived from religious sources or from cultural sources.

#### 4) **Education**

This involves the promotion of a child’s skills and aptitudes, his capacities for work and recreational pursuits as well as his intellectual and artistic development. They all form an integral part of his welfare. While the acquisition of formal education in the neighbourhood school may be adequate, occasionally, a special kind of educational experience may be indicated because of the presence of emotional disturbance or a particular intellectual deficiency.

#### 5) **Religious or Spiritual Welfare**

Because of the sensitivity of this aspect of child welfare, it is suggested that the merits of any given form of religious upbringing or purely formal religious connection would be best served by respect for the autonomy of the child as an individual. Furthermore, it is argued that it would be promoted by allowing progressive development without externally imposed change depending on the child’s age and ability for choice.

Following from the above welfare mix, key development issues which both governments and parents must continue to give to increased and persistent attention have been identified for different categories of children

#### a) **Early Childhood Development Issues**

- Impact of nutritional deficiencies and poor health on physical growth and cognitive development
- Worsening conditions for early child care in the home, due to decline of the extended family in urban areas, increased involvement of women in the labour force and reduced options for child minding
- Negative effects of gender differentiation in child-raising and socialization
- Low involvement of fathers in child raising
- Lack of books and toys for mental stimulation
- Inadequate number, and poor quality of day-care centres and pre-primary schools; high fees which create a barrier for the poor

#### b) **Primary School Years**

- Late start to primary school
- Declining primary school enrolment rates since the mid-1990s due to failure to expand capacity, loss of credibility of the education system and high opportunity cost of education for growing numbers of poor families

- Large geographical disparities in access to primary education, to the disadvantage of children in the north, especially in the case of girls
  - Low learning achievement, resulting from impediments in the home (poverty, child work and lack of electricity) and poor quality of primary education, due to inadequate teachers (number, training and motivation) learning materials and infrastructure and ultimately low levels of funding.
- c) Secondary School Years
- Low transition rate from primary to junior secondary school and consequently low junior secondary school Gross Enrolment Ratio; challenge of making Universal Basic Education a reality at junior secondary school level, requiring large increases in school infrastructure, trained teachers, learning materials and financial resources
  - Continuing disadvantages in educational access for girls in the north
  - A formal education system poorly attuned to the needs of the labour market resulting in loss of credibility and, in the South East and South South, premature withdrawal of boys from schools in favour of apprenticeships
  - Low enrolment in, and poor quality of, public-sector vocational and technical colleges

By 1996 it was estimated that 67.1 million Nigerians were living in poverty. The percentage of the population below the National Poverty Line in rural areas of the country stood at 56.6 percent in 2004 and 52.8 percent in 2010 while in urban areas, it was 37.9 percent and 34.1 percent in 2004 and 2010 respectively. The figures were released by the United Nations on 6 July 2015. The 6<sup>th</sup> July 2015 indicators released by the United Nations show that the literacy rates of young persons aged 15-24 years stood at 66.4 percent by 2008; and the percent of pupils reaching the last grade of primary school was 65.7 percent by 2010. These show that the developmental concerns which governments and parents must continue to give particular are more real now.

It is important however to realize that this is not the time to give up. One propelling motivation is to have a proper view of these issues. They must be engaged from the point of view of children's rights if we are to address them properly.

### 3. What Rights Affect Child Development Issues?

Children's lives are to a considerable extent shaped by social-legal policy. The prevalent images of children affect what shape that policy may take. Children were silent and invisible for a long time. Social policy towards children actually underscored the nature of the relationship between the family and the state. That reality, much more than being a recognition of the fact that most children spend most of their childhood within families, is based on the view that children are virtually "invisible" within the family unit and they have almost no separate social policy identity. The family-state relationship that submerges the child sees the family as an autonomous "natural" and "private" institution outside the realm of the state; and alongside, and bound up

with, the privacy accorded to families is responsibility for dependent members. This means state policy in the relationship will focus on the *family* as a unit. It has been stated that the real aim of supporting the family is supporting family responsibility as state responsibility. The corollary is that social policy should not interfere with the family's responsibility to care for its dependents and that it is in the national interest for the state to *help* parents discharge that responsibility properly. Consequently, the fact that children are subsumed within the term "family" prevents them from becoming the primary focus of policy. We are therefore suggesting strongly that state policies targeted at child should be exclusively child-focused or child-centred.

However, a child-centred social policy must start from the premise that children have inherent value as individuals in their own right and not merely, or even mainly, as future adults or as just members of a family. Even though parental rights as provided by local custom are to be respected they must however be seen more as parental obligations and responsibilities than rights. It is the child that should have rights relative to his development. The child should be entitled to an opportunity to make his views known. Interestingly, the international agreements on children project important underlying principles and values. Five principles have been identified, namely:

- 1) Children are visible and central
- 2) Children are people with inalienable human rights
- 3) Children have a right to special assistance
- 4) Children's own view should be given due weight
- 5) There should be greater emphasis on state rather than family responsibility

As early as 1972, Forster and Freed advocated a ten-point "Bill of Rights for Children." Even though it especially concerned older children in situations where the state was involved in one way or the other, they insisted that the child has a moral right and should have a legal right to

- 1) Receive parental love and affection, discipline and guidance and to grow to maturity in a home environment which enables him to develop into a mature and responsible adult
- 2) Be supported, maintained and educated to the best of parental ability in return for which he has a moral duty to honor his father and mother
- 3) Be regarded as a *person* within the family, at school and before the law
- 4) Receive fair treatment from all in authority
- 5) Be heard and listened to
- 6) Earn and keep his own earnings
- 7) Seek and obtain medical care and treatment and counseling
- 8) Emancipation from parent-child relationship when that relationship has broken down and the child has left home due to abuse, neglect, serious family conflict and other sufficient cause and his best interest would be served by the termination of parental authority
- 9) Be free of legal disabilities or incapacities save where such are convincingly shown to be necessary and protective of the actual best interests of the child.
- 10) Receive special care, consideration and protection in the administration of law or justice so that his best interests are a paramount factor.

They reasoned that it would be wrong to speak down to children about duty and responsibility when their rights are neglected.

In many intact families today, even though the developmental interests of a vast majority of children are not protected as a right, they are satisfied through the natural workings of the economies of the family. So long as basic interests are not threatened, then state intrusion over the disposition of the resources of the intact family would be inappropriate. On the other hand, it has been observed that the developmental interests of children are threatened and come in conflict with those of parents when the family experiences economic or social setback in the form of financial difficulties or is split by divorce or separation. Therefore, it is of interest to discover how far the legal regulation of income distribution in these circumstances can be characterized as the protection of that interest. Strongly opposed adult interests could undermine children's interests in those circumstances. Therefore, it is imperative that in the event of family disruption or financial downturn we must determine the full extent of what the interests of children are and the degree to which, by restraining the fulfillment of conflicting interests of adults, the children's interests should be promoted to the status of rights.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have indicated that we must project an inclusive definition of who a child is due to our socio-economic realities as well as the case of our special-needs children. It is also pertinent to have a proper view of children. We must see them as rights-possessors and not just as objects of adult control and domination. Children's welfare and development issues are wide-ranging and are not limited to the physical. Importantly, they must be perceived from the perspective of right and not privileges. That said, governments must become more pro-active in installing pro-family policies that will assist parents fulfill their obligations to their children. Tax reliefs should be implemented and rates should be minimal in the case of families with children. Housing policy must favour families with children. These will leave more money in the pockets of parents to cater to the welfare of children. The state should take up the care of abandoned, abused and neglected children. On the part of parents, responsible behaviour is a must. Finance-draining bad habits should be cut-off and are discouraged. Excessive drinking, smoking and flirting must be avoided by parents. Parents should complement pro-family government policies by working hard to cater for the needs of children. Absent-parenting is wrong. Both parents must be present in the home to give attention to children. Parents must be very interested in what their children are doing at home, in the neighbourhood and at school. The truth is that there are many things that parents can do to contribute to the development of children. Let us try our best. If we fail, let it not be because that we did not do our best. The creator loves families and with his support we will succeed.

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