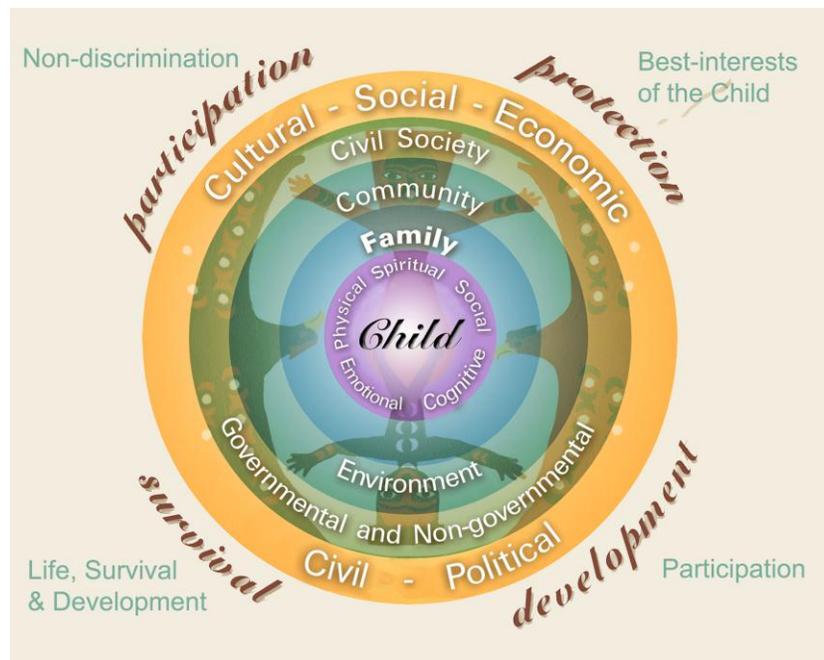# A Developmental Child Rights Approach

"It's not enough just to save the children. We have to work with them to save us!"

Karl Eric Knutsson

IICRD frames its work with children and their communities through a systems perspective entitled the *Child Rights Ecology*. The *Child Rights Ecology* is inspired by IICRD's logo of the Flight of the Thunderbirds in which the integration of the black thunderbird of positive cultural traditions for children and the red thunderbird of the CRC metaphorically "take flight" in breathing life into child rights.

Child Rights Ecology

The *Child Rights Ecology* builds on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecology of childhood developed by adding a child rights, "strength based" and culturally grounded developmental lens.

The *Child Rights Ecology* places each **child at the center** of a series of concentric, nested circles representing differing layers of support networks with the child's basic human developmental needs and potentials represented in the inner physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and social circle.

Research indicates that **stronger links** between each system of circles result in children having healthier connections through positive relationships with their human and natural environment, which in turn leads to greater resilience and healthier individual and community development outcomes. Conversely, in situations of social and political breakdown in which these supportive and protective mechanisms are eroded or damaged, children's developmental outcomes will be negatively impacted (Jessor, 1993; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1982).

The precise structure of the *Child Rights Ecology* will be determined by the child's socio-cultural environment, thus representations of family, community, civil society and government will vary for each child in the context of their unique social configuration and their culture. While the concentric circles represent connecting systems of a child's social life, they do not infer that a child must "cross" one or more systems to reach another system or circle of support. For example a child can directly interact with local government without going through his or her family.

The four clusters of child rights articles (survival, development, protection and participation) are represented as cross-cutting children's needs, as well as the CRC's four guiding principles (non-discrimination, best interest of the child, survival/development/protection, and participation).

I.   Shifting to a Child Rights Approach from a Needs or Child Welfare Orientation

In order to understand IICRD's *Developmental Child Rights Approach* it is important to examine current notions of childhood, social policy that results from these notions, and the socio-historical context from which children's rights have evolved.

Historically, children have been viewed as passive beneficiaries of charitable assistance and a "noble cause", rather than as active participants in their own development or as "worthy citizens" (Knutson, 1997). The needs, or welfare approach to children arose primarily from the Industrial age and the ensuing Child Saving Era. This is represented in many current child protection and humanitarian approaches to children.

A Needs or Welfare Approach

Needs or welfare approaches to children's interventions often:

- ♦   Focus on meeting needs;
- ♦   Use charity as the driving motivation and method for meeting needs, rather than empowerment;
- ♦   Work toward outcome goals and ignore process;
- ♦   Target the manifestations of problems and immediate causes of problems, rather than the systemic issues and the overall well being of a child;
- ♦   View stakeholders as victims rather than potential change agents;
- ♦   Make assumptions about the "best interest of a child" without input from the child or a true understanding of the child's context;
- ♦   Involve narrow sectoral projects that do not involve collaboration of sectors or a an understanding of the context;
- ♦   Use culturally bound and blind assumptions about risk and protection, and
- ♦   Focus on immediate risks with little emphasis on broader social policy.

In relation to the child's social ecology, welfare approaches tend to focus on the immediate needs of the child, and frequently down play or disregard deeper systemic

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2

challenges and inequalities such as poverty and discrimination. Similarly, agencies applying interventions using needs approaches frequently assume what is best for children based on rapid assessments of problems founded on dominant culture perception of risk, protection and human development. The forced removal of Canadian Indigenous children from their communities during the residential school period based on inappropriate notions of children's "best interest" is a good example of how well intentioned needs approaches can undermine children and their healthy development.

II.   A Child Rights Approach

A child rights based approach flows naturally from more enlightened perspectives on the human condition. Human rights can be understood as ethical imperatives derived from an appreciation of and respect for the broad range of human needs and potentials (Adler, 1981; Pappas, 1983), which have been referred to as deficit and being needs (Maslow, 1970).   Human beings need food, shelter, affiliation, and protection from a variety of physical, psychological and social dangers – all of which deserve status as rights. They also have the need to realize potentials that are particular to being human, such as the potential for creative acts, for compassion and sacrifice based on affiliation and on principle, for participation in thinking and actions that influence their welfare, contributions, and fulfillment, and for existential thought and choice across all issues and sectors of their lives.

The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, which recognizes all these needs and potentials as rights, entered into force in 1990 and set out a new legal framework in which children are no longer viewed as the objects of compassion or pity, but as the subjects of human rights under international law. Experience gleaned from implementing the CRC over nearly two decades has resulted in a body of experience within NGO's and Governments that applies the human rights approach to implementing and monitoring children's rights.

Child Rights Programs:
- Give serious attention to children's rights under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* to enable children to **participate** in decisions that affect their lives, and to have their views duly considered, according to their age, maturity and evolving capacity. Encouraging children's participation as "stakeholders" in the development, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives that are meant to help them will result in better programming;
- View children's rights as **universal, interdependent and indivisible**, and does not promote some children's rights as more important than others;
- Question the reasons why efforts do not reach some children, and try to **identify the root causes of violations** of children's rights. For example, to provide all girls and boys with a basic education, it is important to know if children are working fulltime and require more flexible school hours, if they are unable to reach schools because of disability or distance, if they are dropping out of school because of ethnic discrimination, or if schools are closed because of armed conflict. Gender analysis is also needed to identify the different barriers that prevent girls and boys from receiving an education;

- Accept that promoting **the rights of children of all ages** is important. It also recognizes that a child's needs and their ability to respond to them will differ significantly, according to their age, and
- Emphasize the **importance of prevention, early intervention and awareness-raising** activities that inform children and their communities about children's rights, and
- Outline **obligations of duty bearers** that hold systems and governments accountable and values efforts to strengthen local capacity to respond to the challenges.

In the context of the Child Rights Ecology, Child Rights Approaches emphasize systems of accountability between duty bearers and the child. Special focus is therefore given to monitoring rights gaps between systems, strengthening the capacity of duty bearers from the level of government down to families in fulfilling rights, as well building the capacity of children to understand their rights and participate in decisions affecting them.

Challenges of a Child Rights Approach

The limitation of a child rights approach is the frequent application of children's rights in a legalistic, normative fashion that ignores the importance of local context. As a result, families and communities may feel threatened by notions of children's rights that primarily focus on parent's duties without reinforcing government's obligations to support families.

Traditional human rights approaches tend to emphasize gaps, deficits and violations and do not include a focus on naturally occurring protective mechanisms and supportive factors in their analysis or actions. Finally, while child rights approaches emphasize the importance of listening to children and providing space for children's views to be heard and considered in decisions affecting them, they often do not include a deeper respect for children's participation as a developmental process that starts from birth, is rooted in power dynamics, and is shaped by children's physical and social environment.

III.   IICRD's Developmental Child Rights Approach: The Value Added of "Top Down" and "Bottom Up"

In it's 14 years experience of implementing children's rights, IICRD has developed the *Developmental Child Rights Approach* as a conceptual framework with key tools to assist children, families, communities, and professionals integrate the "top down" legally oriented child rights approach with it's emphasis on the accountability of duty bearers to rights holders, with a developmental, "bottom up" approach that builds on children's developmental processes, invests in young peoples' own assets, and reinforces the protective mechanisms of their family, community and culture.

This is supported by an emerging "capability approach" to development (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Sen, 2000) that emphasizes the importance of capabilities and opportunities as foundations for peoples' full and healthy development as opposed to a more narrowly defined economic definition of development. It similarly builds on "assets" or strength based models of community development (Kertzman & McKnight, 1993) and youth development (Dryfoos, 1990) that emphasize the inner resources of young people as important starting places in addressing risk.

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4

A developmental approach emphasizes the investment in young people's assets and protective factors rather than focusing solely on specific problems. It is recognized to be more effective in addressing child and youth problems than a welfare approach. Similarly, a developmental approach sheds light on the context of children's lives, emphasizing the importance of connectedness, achievement, participation, and strategic partnership as effective strategies for overcoming challenges to children and youth (Rajani, 2001). This is in keeping with a rights approach that recognizes children as subjects of rights but extends the effectiveness of the rights approach in mobilizing local assets and protective mechanisms in creating an enabling environment for children's survival, development, protection and participation (Cook, Blanchet-Cohen, Hart, 2004).

This is reflected in all rings of the *Child Rights Ecology* acting in harmony. IICRD's focus on implementing the *Developmental Child Rights Approach* is to integrate the best of both rights and developmental approaches in creating systems change leading to positive impacts in children's lives. In doing this, IICRD focuses on identifying accountability gaps and building strategic partnerships between the different levels of the *Child Rights Ecology* systems in order to leverage social change benefiting children.

A comparison of the 3 approaches to working with children is provided in the table below
These differences should not, however, be seen as mutually exclusive, since the three approaches build on each other.

NEEDS BASED	RIGHTS BASED	DEVELOPMENTAL RIGHTS BASED
♦ Works toward outcome goals	♦ Works toward outcome and process goals	♦ Focuses on Accountability
♦ Emphasizes meeting needs	♦ Emphasizes realizing rights	♦ Addresses the need for capacity building of duty bearers
♦ Recognizes needs as valid claims	♦ Recognizes that rights always imply obligations of the state	♦ Supports children's agency
♦ Meets needs without empowerment	♦ Recognizes that rights can only be realized with empowerment	♦ Identifies rights gaps
♦ Accepts charity as the driving motivation for meeting needs	♦ States that charity is insufficient motivation or meeting needs	♦ Builds strategic partnerships
♦ Focuses on manifestations of problems and immediate causes of problems	♦ Focuses on structural causes of problems, as well as manifestations and immediate causes of problems	♦ Respects traditional cultural practices
♦ Involves narrow sectoral projects	♦ Involves inter-sectoral, holistic projects and programs	♦ Builds assets
♦ Focuses on immediate problems with little emphasis on policy	♦ Focuses on social, economic, cultural, civil, and political context, and is policy-oriented	♦ Reinforces and supports local protective mechanism
♦ "The need for vaccination has been met for 80% of all children."	♦ "The right to vaccination is denied to 20% of all children."	

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5

IV. Key Metrics for Systems Change: Operationalizing "Top Down" and "Bottom Up" with IICRD's Developmental Child Rights Approach

In operationalizing the "Top Down" and "Bottom Up" *Developmental Child Rights Approach*, IICRD has developed a series of metrics, or leverage points, that have been found to be effective in systems change supporting children. IICRD has applied these metrics successfully in the contexts of: children living in poverty or whose families are breaking down, children affected by HIV/AIDS, Indigenous children's rights, children impacted by natural disasters and war affected children. The key metrics for change are framed through the 4 guiding principles of the CRC:

- ♦ Non-discrimination;
- ♦ Best interests of the child;
- ♦ Life, survival and development, and
- ♦ Participation.

The metrics are summarized in the following "Top Down" Accountability and "Bottom Up" Assets and Cultural Grounding.

a) "Top Down" Accountability – Metrics 1 to 5
The "top down" child rights approach is essential to implementing the 4 guiding principles to build systems of **accountability** for children. Key component parts of IICRD's application of a *Developmental Child Rights Approach* include:

1. ***Assessment and analysis*** of a problem from the perspective of rights holders and duty bearers in relation to "rights gaps" and "rights bridges";
2. Programming that assesses the ***capacity of rights holders*** to claim their rights;
3. Building capacity to ***strengthen duty bearers*** ability to meet their obligations;
4. Addressing ***structural inequalities*** by identifying government gaps in civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights (e.g. access to basic services, judicial due process, allocating resources), and strengthening dispute resolution and complaint mechanisms to overcome these inequalities, and
5. ***Monitoring*** to establish mechanisms to examine and implement rights.

b) "Bottom Up" Assets and Cultural Grounding – Metrics 6-10
The "bottom up" developmental approach is informed by current theory on children's development and draws on assets, community development strategies and knowledge of cultural context to strategically link systems of accountability with local protective mechanisms. Children's "agency" as reflected in meaningful decision making, fostering opportunities, developing capabilities and applying strengths is central to both top down and bottom up approaches.

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International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD), British Columbia, Canada

6

Key components of a developmental approach include:

6. Understanding children's development as an **interactive process** linking the child and his or her environment;
7. Supporting **cultural values** that shape a child's development, (goals of human development, childrearing traditions, childhood image, concepts of adolescents etc);
8. Recognizing the unique configuration of **internal assets** of the child (e.g. self identity, locus of control, sense of humour);
9. Reinforcing local **protective mechanisms** (extended family, school, clubs, peer groups, faith based organizations), and
10. Promoting **supports for protective mechanisms** (social policy, labour markets, child care, and community development) and mechanisms that implement children's rights (children's participation in processes and decision-making).

IICRD Tools to Measure the Metrics and Promote Systems Change include:

♦ Asset mapping (internal and external);
♦ Child participation (spider-gram, focus groups, jenga, photo-frame, community walking tours);
♦ Assessing patterns of social support (experiential community exercises);
♦ Examining patterns of social inclusion and exclusion (social mapping);
♦ Understanding local decision making affecting children (children's matrices, surveys);
♦ Comparing benefits of different accountability settings (key informant interviews, surveys);
♦ Situational Analysis to assess accountability (legal and policy analysis, key stakeholder interviews and surveys);
♦ Child Rights Action Research (Triple "A" Child Participation Tools), and
♦ Strengthening partnership learning for collaboration (PAR and Developmental Evaluation).

The metrics and their respective research tools are brought to life in IICRD's broad range of projects and programs and reflect the wings of the Thunderbird taking flight in support of children's full and healthy development. They also provide an empirical basis upon which we can better work with young people and their communities as partners in creating peace, dignity and respect for children and our world.

Child Rights in Practice: Tools for Social Change Workbook (2007)
International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD), British Columbia, Canada

7

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Child Rights in Practice: Tools for Social Change Workbook (2007)
International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD), British Columbia, Canada

8