



# Children's Representation in the Transnational Mirror Maze

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## INTRODUCTION

The chapter takes a critical stance towards organisations that claim to speak on behalf of children in transnational politics and global governance. Global power is exercised by a diffuse set of actors who exercise multiple types of power that interact in numerous ways and that have varying degrees of impact (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Moon, 2019). Given their embeddedness in transnational politics and world affairs, international intergovernmental as well as non-governmental organisations participate in global governance and wield important portions of transnational public power, including on matters against which they are struggling. Take for instance the International Labour Organization (ILO) that occupies a central role in the global child labour regime (van Daalen & Hanson, 2019). In its vast transnational advocacy campaign to abolish child labour, the ILO claims to be speaking on behalf of children and to defend their rights and interests on the transnational arena of which it forms itself part.

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However, social movements of working children contest ILO's abolitionist perspective and find that the organisation merely defends the interests of its constituents, which are composed of representatives of governments, workers and employers, but does not represent positions taken by organised working children who see the ILO as their opponent rather as their spokesperson (see also van Daalen, this volume). This does not imply that you should retreat from speaking for others; such a position not only undercuts political effectiveness, but also stands in opposition to social justice ideals of collaboration and solidarity (Alcoff, 1991). The example does, however, point at current limits of representing children at the transnational level.

The dynamics at work in children's representation at the transnational level evokes a story told by Charlie Chaplin who was not only a famous filmmaker, actor and composer but also a great visionary and talented supplier of metaphors. In his 1928 film *The Circus*, the Tramp character escapes the police and takes cover at the local fancy fair in a mirror maze. The maze's interlocking mirrors and glass panes make it difficult for the little fellow to hide from the police or to find his way out of the maze but also for the police to catch him. Do persons or groups who in transnational arenas speak on behalf of children merely confirm global power imbalances between adults and children who are deemed not to be able to defend themselves? Or are children's spokespersons indispensable to advocate for their rights on complex and multi-layered international political stages? Like in a mirror maze, which obfuscates rather than enlightens where a person stands and how to move ahead, you cannot simply take for granted whose interests are represented nor the aims and direction of interventions and discourses on behalf of children.

The chapter will critically analyse the performances of children's representation in the transnational political arena: who is representing children and where are such representations enacted? To do so we will look at two largely advertised international struggles in favour of children's human rights. The first concerns international advocacy around minimum age legislation for child soldiering, a campaign led by transnational advocacy networks that claim to represent children and young people's rights and interests but in which child combatants do not take part. The second is about children and young people who have taken the lead to fight climate change via international legal procedures. Both cases illustrate the tension between transnational approaches that favour a 'global childhood' and national and other interests at stake in childhood politics. In our

conclusion, we will consider possible strategies for children's representation to escape the mirror maze.

### A WORLD COALITION AGAINST CHILD SOLDIERING

Like other situations where children 'don't do the right thing' such as marry young, commit offences or work (Hanson, 2016), the main idea defended in transnational children's rights advocacy concerning child soldiering is that a high minimum age is needed to respect children's fundamental rights. In international legislation concerning child soldiering, Article 38 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter: CRC) had set the minimum age for the direct participation in hostilities and the recruitment into the armed forces at fifteen years. This minimum age limit, which was compatible with the then applicable international humanitarian law, has been criticised since its adoption and has sparked a large coalition of NGOs and States to engage in an international advocacy campaign in favour of a 'straight-eighteen' position on child soldiering and to raise the minimum age of child soldiering to eighteen years (Hanson, 2011). The coalition's successful lobbying efforts resulted in the adoption, in 2000, of the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC) that raised the minimum age to eighteen years for children's direct participation in hostilities and for their compulsory recruitment, whereas the minimum age for voluntary recruitment is set at sixteen years for the national armed forces of the State and at eighteen years for armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a State. The minimum ages set in OPAC are close to the advocated 'straight-eighteen' position. The only exceptions concern absence of a minimum age provision for indirect participation in hostilities, the exemption of military schools to fulfil the minimum age requirements and the remaining option for States to voluntarily recruit young people below eighteen years in their national armies. OPAC's supporters hence acclaim the protocol as 'a significant milestone in the international community's halting journey towards the adoption of a policy that would see the cessation of all forms of recruitment and participation of children in armed conflict' (Sheppard, 2000, p. 63).

The optimistic assessment of the international community's virtues is tempered when looking at how the provisions dealing with children's voluntary recruitment in the national armed forces have distinctively been implemented in different nations. Art 3(2) OPAC prescribes that upon

ratification, States must submit a binding declaration in which they indicate the applicable minimum age for voluntary recruitment into their national armed forces, which should be at a minimum sixteen, and the safeguards it has adopted to ensure that such recruitment is not forced or coerced. Whereas most ratifying countries have set at least eighteen years as minimum age for voluntary recruitment, four out of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council do not comply with the ‘straight-eighteen’ standard. China, France and the United States of America have declared seventeen, and the United Kingdom of Great-Britain and Northern Ireland sixteen as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment in their national armies. In its concluding observations on the reports submitted by these countries, the Committee on the Rights of the Child that has played a pivotal role in the straight-eighteen campaign recommends these countries review and raise their voluntary recruitment ages to eighteen years by referring to the ‘spirit and principles’ of the OPAC and of the CRC (Hanson & Molima, 2019). It is revealing to look at the explanations given by the UK, the country with the lowest minimum age, for recruiting persons as of sixteen years in its national army. The UK State Party report of 2007, which was submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child that is charged with monitoring compliance with OPAC, for instance, elaborates on the reasons why young people are attracted into pursuing careers in the armed forces (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007a). These deal with the country’s need to dispose of necessary manpower to maintain its defence commitments in a competitive labour market as well as with the educational opportunities offered by the armed forces that turns many of its young recruits, including from disadvantaged backgrounds, into a highly trained and capable workforce. The 2007 UK report observes that this gives young people ‘a sense of great achievement and worth, as well as benefiting society as a whole’ (ibid., para 18). Taking a stance against what is understood as being a worldwide opinion, including the CRC Committee and almost all children’s rights organisations large and small, the country maintains, together with all but one of its colleagues at the Security Council, that it is beneficial not only for the country and its army but also for the young people concerned to start voluntary recruitment below eighteen years. China equally argues that voluntary enlistment in the army, from seventeen years onwards, is an aspiration and an honour for many young people and also gives them a competitive advantage in the job market (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). France, like China and the United States,

which allows young people to be recruited from seventeen years onwards, also received criticism from the Committee on the Rights of the Child for the lack of a clear objective in complying with the internationally championed 'straight-eighteen' doctrine (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007b). Interestingly, besides justifying its own national minimum age for recruitment in the national army, France also highlighted, in its initial report under OPAC, its international activism concerning the situation of children in armed conflict, including its funding of NGOs that advocate for the protection of child soldiers and have adopted a 'straight eighteen' approach (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

Transnational advocacy undertaken by large NGO coalitions in the field of child soldiering has been instrumental, as mentioned above, to raise minimum ages in international law that in turn has impacted national legislation in most countries. As shown in earlier research (Hanson & Molima, 2019), asymmetries continue to exist in international policy regarding the recruitment of young people into the armed forces. On the one hand, established democracies and permanent members of the Security Council do not feel obliged to adapt their national practices and give in to pressure from transnational advocacy campaigns to raise their minimum age for voluntary recruitment to eighteen. Similar to social developments in the UK and the United States, which—due to a situation of persistent need for military manpower—have stepped up their efforts to attract young people to future military careers, China, for example, claims that the needs of the armed forces hamper raising the age for military recruitment to eighteen. On the other hand, newer democracies and less powerful regimes are more willing to show the international community that they endorse 'global opinion' and more easily adopt an unconditional 'straight-eighteen' position on child soldiering. In their discussions with supranational entities like the Committee on the Rights of the Child, powerful countries like the UK or France contest the standpoints of transnational advocacy networks by ultimately relying on their national sovereignty. Reversely, in the transnational political arena, and especially vis-à-vis politically less powerful countries, they no longer put at the centre the national sovereignty of other states but refer to humanitarian concerns on child soldiering that rely on the presumed vulnerability and weakness of children and young people. A totally different position is taken by younger nations, for instance, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a fragile state that distinguishes between internal and external uses of international legislation. To the international community, the Democratic Republic of

the Congo presents itself as a State that follows the generally accepted international rules, and hence aligns its legislation with the ‘straight-eighteen’ position on child soldiering and young people’s perceived vulnerability. For internal purposes, the country is less inclined to follow the same path but instead takes as a point of departure the nation’s national interests.

Two more general insights can be derived from this case. First, the global humanitarian campaign for a universal ‘straight eighteen’ position towards child soldiering is an enterprise entirely run by well-meaning outsiders without the direct or indirect participation of children and young people. It is ironic that in what some advocates have called a ‘war against the use of child soldiers’ (Sheppard, 2000, p. 46) the concerned children and young people, who have first-hand experience in fighting battles, have no place in ‘the arsenal of weapons to be employed’. The successful global advocacy efforts to increase the minimum age for child soldiering provide a blueprint of the idea and practice that children are not needed for the advancement of children’s rights. To advance the cause, children are represented by ‘others’ who in the transnational political arena speak and act in the name of children and young people. Moreover, the absence of ‘children’s voices’ in these debates is not even questioned; the legitimacy of a transnational coalition of faith-based groups, humanitarian organisations, large children’s rights entities to represent children’s rights and interests in political debates about child soldiering seems self-evident. The example illustrates, as is the case for many other transnational advocacy campaigns in the children’s rights field, that children’s representation can be performed without involving children (see also Tabak, this volume).

Second, the discussion of minimum ages related to child soldiering illustrates the importance of national sovereignty for national and global representations of children (Hanson, 2021). Notwithstanding transnational networks’ considerable influence on global childhood discourse, States continue to exercise a dominant share of the political power for elaborating national childhood and youth policies. In discourses for national audiences, States do not necessarily observe globalised ideas around vulnerable childhoods but refer to the Westphalian political order, especially in matters pertaining to their national armed forces, which lends them the sole power over their territories and justifies state sovereignty. For international audiences, discourses differ depending on a State’s relative position in the transnational political arena. Permanent members of the Security Council can, as we have seen, assume out loud on the

international scene that their national interests prevail over global childhood ideals, and at the same time ask other States to always give preference to global childhood ideals. Less powerful States are keen to show in transnational realms that they follow up on that request and adhere to universal, Western representations of childhood vulnerability, even if for national audiences they continue to give precedence to their national interests over globalised childhood ideals. What you see in the transnational mirror is hence not necessarily what you see in the national one. More powerful states, who are keen to preserve their own national sovereignty and promote international norms, tend to accept the double image projected by less powerful states. Global discourses about vulnerable childhoods on the international level go hand in hand with state sovereignty discourse at the national level. In other words, on the international plane countries from the global South need to show obedience to global childhood ideals but have a greater margin of autonomous action once they turn to their internal affairs. Out of genuine self-interest to preserve their own sovereignty claims as much as possible, powerful States accept the autonomy of less powerful states. Doing otherwise would undermine the idea of their own sovereignty.

There are many passages crossing the maze. Notwithstanding globalisation, political debates on children's representation in global affairs do not only take place on indeterminate transnational political spaces, but also, at the same time, at national political levels. It is important to reflect not only on who speaks or acts on behalf of children, but also on the political forums where this speaking and acting take place. In the following section I turn to a second case that focuses on an international legal procedure on climate change which has been introduced by young people. In this case, children and young people represent children's rights and interests in a transnational matter that is discussed as part of an international legal procedure.

### THE CHILDREN OF THE WORLD VS. CLIMATE CHANGE

The urgency to curb further global warming and to fight the global consequences of climate change has given rise to introducing environmental protection cases that concern the rights of children and of future generations before courts in a wide range of countries including Germany, South Africa, Peru and South Korea (Nolan, 2021). Wewerinke-Singh (2021) observes that as of October 2021, eighty-three cases have been filed before

domestic courts concerning States or corporations' inadequate climate action, whereas nineteen such cases have been introduced before regional and international judicial bodies. Amongst the latter is a communication submitted in 2019 to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child by sixteen children from twelve different nationalities. Their claim is directed against five respondent States (Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Turkey) who have ratified or accessed the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. All these States are member of the 2014 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communication procedure (OPIC) and have hence agreed that individuals or group of individuals may submit communications concerning the violation, by the concerned State, of any of the rights contained in the CRC or its Optional Protocols. The child petitioners, who at the time of the communication were between eight and seventeen years old, assert that each of the five respondent States helped cause the climate crisis, and, despite the knowledge that this endangers children's fundamental rights, is still perpetuating the crisis by undermining the global collective effort to solve it. In their communication, the complainants state that

By recklessly causing and perpetuating excessive levels of carbon emissions, the respondents are failing to prevent the deadly and harmful impacts of climate change, and are violating the petitioners' rights to life, health, and culture, and failing to have the best interest of the child be a primary consideration in their climate actions. (Communication to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019, para. 258)

A remarkable role in support of this petition was played by UNICEF who called this a 'landmark case' that was announced at a press conference hosted at UNICEF Headquarters in New York. The press release for this event cites UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Charlotte Petri Gornitzka who refers to 'the world's children' who are said to be holding, through this petition, 'the world' and its leaders accountable to their commitment for children's rights by having adopted, thirty years earlier, the CRC (UNICEF, 2019). During the press conference, one of the young petitioners, youth climate activist Alexandria Villaseñor from the United States, confirms that the group of children who claim that their rights have been violated stand here 'as citizens of the planet' who are victims of enduring pollution.



UNICEF's support of a small group of children to file a complaint to a human rights treaty body in the name of the 2.3 billion children of the world replicates the popular idea that children represent the present and future citizens of a single Planet Earth. This position is reminiscent of cosmopolitanism that considers all human beings, irrespective of their social or political affiliation, as belonging to a universal community of world citizens (Kleingeld & Brown, 2019), and which is widespread in discourses on children's involvement in environmental movement struggles (see e.g. Buhre, this volume Chap. 11). The argument made, in short, is that global climate change is a worldwide problem that, unconstrained by national borders, impacts every person on the planet. Global environmental challenges call for global political reactions. Political responses to solve the current environmental crisis cannot therefore be limited to nation states but need to be devised at the universal level. The prevalence of cosmopolitan worldviews on both environmental concerns and children's rights allows investigating from a different angle the two central questions being discussed in this chapter, namely, *who* can be seen as representing the children of the world and *where* do we locate power in transnational policy making.

Who can legitimately claim to represent the children of the world? In the complaint procedure on global warming, UNICEF does not explain why or how these sixteen young individuals, and not others, have been selected to speak on behalf of the world's children. The petitioners have not been elected by the planet's children to represent them nor have they been designated based on their expertise in environmental matters or particular vulnerability for the impact of climate change. As I have observed elsewhere (Hanson, 2015), the OPIC procedure has mainly been established for strategic litigation purposes as an additional advocacy instrument to raise international awareness for specific concerns. In this case the sixteen child petitioners appear as symbolic victims of violations of children's rights who have been selected for reasons undisclosed by unidentified entities, with the support of UNICEF, to initiate a case before an international treaty monitoring body. The question of how representative this small number of children is for all victims of climate change is similar to points that need to be resolved by any social movement which strategically makes use of individual legal procedures to draw attention to broader problems.

In a recently published practical guide for lawyers who defend children in conflict with the law, Defence for Children International (DCI)—

Belgium (2018) gives legal practitioners advice on the use of strategic litigation for the promotion of children's rights. Besides suggesting that they must be careful while deciding which international procedure to engage with, that it is important to cooperate with NGOs and that an individual case should sufficiently reflect a structural problem, the publication sees the choice of individual children for a case as a matter of ethics. Before starting a strategic legal procedure, the child must give its authorisation and also the best interests of the child need to be considered. These recommendations are in line with the rules of procedure to bring a communication before the Committee on the Rights of the Child in Article 3 OPIIC that includes safeguards to ensure that those who are acting on the child's behalf are not manipulating children. Whether an individual child has been forced or instrumentalised against its will to represent a larger group of children deals with child protection and is a negative question. Children should be protected from being manipulated to act as spokespersons for a global cause, including the defence of human rights or the environment. Critics of children's involvement in social movements often mobilise the argument that children, because of their deemed incompetency to make autonomous political decisions, are manipulated by others as a means to delegitimise their arguments. In the present case on children's rights implications of climate change, we assume that the young people have not been manipulated and that these ethical considerations are being respected. We have no reason to believe that these child petitioners have been prompted to submit the communication or are being instrumentalised for a cause that is not theirs. Many petitioners comprising Alexandria Villaseñor from the United States, Ridhima Pandey from India, Greta Thunberg from Sweden and Ayakha Melithafa from South Africa are internationally known leaders of young people's environmental social movements, and it is difficult to imagine that their engagement with this international legal procedure would be the result of manipulation.

But what do the world's children think of their sixteen representatives? It is not because the rights of the representatives are protected that also the rights of those who are being represented have been considered. Here, the aim is to find out who might legitimately act on behalf of the world's children to fight climate change, which is a positive question. Questions related to children's legal representation in strategic litigation as in the case above are part of a more general 'crisis of representation' (Alcoff, 1991). The problem of speaking for others is salient not only for children but also arises in discussions on the legitimacy of political representation

in liberal democracies and on representativity of social movement leadership in human rights advocacy. Speaking on behalf of others is part of the everyday work of many human and children's rights advocacy NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or Defence for Children International (see e.g. Jo Becker, 2012, 2017). The campaign to raise the minimum age for child soldiering discussed above is an illustration of a case where transnational advocates claim to represent children's rights and interests without involving the concerned child soldiers. According to Neil Stammers (2013) who speaks of 'the problematic of representational power', 'there is not necessarily a problem with NGOs speaking on behalf of the oppressed and those whose rights are being violated or threatened, those NGOs must ensure that they properly represent the interests, views and demands of those they claim to be representing' (p. 283). What are, in any context where the problem of speaking on behalf of others arises, the communication channels, participation methods and the means of representation between spokespersons and the people they claim to speak for? Are the spokespersons appointed through elections, by virtue of their communication skills or expertise on the themes being advocated? Or have they been chosen because they display some form of charismatic authority? And how do these questions play out in children's rights advocacy, where more often than not adults speak on behalf of children?

Even if children speak on behalf of other children (see also Holzscheiter, 2016), we cannot simply assume that sixteen children have received a mandate to speak on behalf of 2.3 billion others. Who would the world's children designate as their representatives to speak on their behalf? In addition, the successful designation of legitimate representatives, on whatever grounds chosen, does not resolve once and for all the problem of speaking for others. What is being expressed will remain under constant scrutiny, for the simple reason that the act of representation is not based on a single discovery of the truth but will continuously be mediated as they are the product of interpretation (Alcoff, 1991). Processes of mediation and interpretation in the field of children's rights can be captured by using the notion 'translation' (Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2013). The claims made by one person or group in the name of another person or group are not simply transferred but they are translated, an activity that involves an active stance of re-production and change that can be critically scrutinised (Freeman, 2009). The question *who* represents the world's children hence needs to be complemented by asking *how* these representatives translate the ideas and opinions of such a large group of people.

The international procedure submitted under OPIC by a group of children is not looking to be perceived as representative of the planet's youngest occupants but is about creating a discursive space in the transnational political arena to put the spotlight on climate change. This becomes clear in the decision adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021) in response to the communication submitted by the sixteen young climate activists. The Committee finds that the complainants have successfully established jurisdiction and recognises their victim status but dismisses the case on the ground that the complainants have not exhausted the legal remedies available at the domestic level. Notwithstanding that no substantive redress has been granted, commentators have hailed the decision as 'ground-breaking' and 'historic' precisely because of its political success in raising awareness about how climate change has an impact on children's rights (Wewerinke-Singh, 2021). The Committee transcends standard limitations of international jurisprudence by using this individual communication procedure as a catalyst for the development of its own new General Comment on children's rights and climate change. Instead of giving redress to the alleged victims of the case, the Committee invites the young authors of the communication to share their views during the upcoming General Comment's drafting process (*ibid.*). The discourse so produced on the impact of climate change on children's rights is hence undoubtedly a political event, not only for the young climate activists but also for its supporters, including UNICEF and the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The latter was called upon to make a ruling on a conflict opposing the young complainants and the alleged States. However, it does not adjudicate the case in favour of the plaintiffs but acts as a transnational advocacy entity by lending its support for the political cause of climate change. As in a maze, rather than offering a clear answer to the claim, the path followed is a puzzling one.

In addition to asking who speaks and what is said and translated, a further relevant question on children's representation is where the conversations take place. Even if the child-led communication procedure on climate change under OPIC deals with a planetarian problem, it is directed against five individual States and not against transnational entities such as multinational corporations or large private investment funds that all bear responsibilities for the state of the world's climate. The nation States, the principal duty bearers for policies on children's well-being and rights, are also the entities that strategically, financially and administratively govern UNICEF, that can achieve its mandate to protect children's rights and

help meet their basic needs only by collaborating with sovereign nation-states (Hanson, 2021). UNICEF is 'controlled by national governments that ultimately respect each and every other country's sovereignty to develop childhood and youth policies. The champion of the world's children, rather than being a cosmopolitan government for all children, is bound hand and foot by nation-states who remain in charge' (Hanson, 2021, p. 6). It is hence remarkable that UNICEF encourages children to submit a complaint before an international adjudicating body, not against transnational actors but against nation States about the impact on children of climate change for which both nation States and transnational actors bear responsibility.

A similar observation can be made regarding the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the entity that is the recipient of this Communication. The Committee has not been created as an international political body but as an entity devolved to monitoring State compliance with the CRC through the country report procedure as well as through the settling of individual communications. Its experts are designated by the member States of the CRC, an international treaty that relies mainly on national governments for its implementation and fully recognises State sovereignty. Within the existing international political system, policies for dealing with the well-being and rights of the world's children are, notwithstanding widespread cosmopolitan beliefs, the primary responsibility of nation-states, not of supranational entities (*ibid.*). The headlong rush of the Committee to call upon the authors of a communication directed against States—a communication that the Committee ultimately decided to dismiss—to participate in the development of a politically sensitive General Comment on children's rights and climate change is surprising. Like in a mirror maze, the apparently random mix between glass panes and mirrors makes it hard to find a way out; we are no longer sure by whom children should be represented in transnational matters nor where these representations are to be performed.

### HOW TO ESCAPE THE MIRROR MAZE?

Why is everything so complicated and often misleading in children's transnational representation? Fraser (2009) can be helpful here as she distinguishes social justice claims between claims that deal with redistribution (of material and immaterial goods between individuals, groups or generations), recognition (of a person's or a groups unique viewpoint on the

world) and representation (who, how and where are questions related to just distribution and to representation discussed). The distinction between the three claims for social justice transpires in the field of childhood and children's rights studies.

Over the last thirty years, global children's rights discourse has been confronted with a proliferation of portrayals of appalling situations of children in the global South, pointing, for instance, at child exploitation, trafficking, child soldiering, violence against children that all emphasise children's victimhood and vulnerability. The large-scale trend of moralisation of discourse and policy in the field of children's rights and human rights (Poretti et al., 2014) has diverted attention away from questions about the economic and structural inequalities and unjust distribution that have caused children's hardship. Notwithstanding the weight attached to the moral arguments of its advocates, the children's rights framework cannot by itself satisfactorily act in response to the impact of large social and economic developments on the lives of children, including the consequences of globalisation. For example, according to the ILO News Room (2020) there has been between 2000 and 2016 a 40 per cent decrease of child labour and its worst forms, an evolution for which the organisation points at the ratification of its own Conventions on the worst forms of child labour and on minimum ages to work, as well as at the adoption of effective national laws and policies. Without entering into a discussion about the extent of this decrease or how it has been measured, it is remarkable that the ILO nowhere mentions macro-economic changes that have occurred during the same period, including overall economic growth and the halving of the number of low-income countries (Steinbach, 2019). To explain changes in the prevalence of child labour by giving credit only to moral persuasion and legislative changes, and by hiding profound concomitant economic changes, seems a distortion rather than a faithful mirror of reality.

It is tempting to think of the world as ultimately obeying to a set of moral values expressed in international human rights law. The children's rights framework provides an appealing blueprint for how a better future would look like, and many consider the implementation of international norms and programmes as the golden road to make that future come closer to reality. Contrary to the decline of claims for just distribution, claims for children's recognition have been on the rise and have dominated discussions on children's rights advocacy. The demand for the recognition of children involves asking us to acknowledge children's special

status and their identity and subjectivities. Notwithstanding growing respect for children's subjectivities and rights 'as children', there are also risks involved in advancing claims for children's recognition. The 'straight-eighteen' position in child soldiering for instance comes down to the essentialisation of an iconic figure, the child soldier, whose history and location have been erased (see also Tabak, this volume).

Fraser distinguishes a third set of social justice claims that deal with questions of representation, which come close to demands for the realisation of children's rights to participation in decision making. Here, a distinction needs to be made between two levels where claims for representation play out. A first level discusses representation of children, including the absence thereof, within the Westphalian political order. Central themes in the discussion are about children and young people's right to vote, political participation or other forms of representation. Children's political representation within the national political space is far from complete compared to the representation of adults who in general have access to designated forms of participation such as voting rights in democratic elections. However, both children and adults suffer from forms of misrepresentation and democratic deficit, expressed by the rise of anti-democratic political parties, protest voters or the many initiatives for intensifying local citizenship and new forms of direct democracy. Within this context, the question how to represent children in national political arenas and decision-making processes needs to be further explored and experimented. The question of children's representation or non-representation within democratic nation states is an important one that needs to be addressed. However, beyond challenges to children's representation at the national level, additional questions arise concerning the deficit of representation of children in transnational power struggles, as illustrated by the transnational advocacy campaigns on child soldiering and the use of international legal procedures in advancing climate activism. Where to recruit representatives of children in the transnational public space as counterforces of transnational power entities?

The question of representation is especially salient on a second level that plays out beyond the nation-State. Within the transnational political order, the situation of children and adults is remarkably much more equal: neither adults nor children have much to say in transnational power struggles. Globalisation has created new transnational powers such as transnational private powers or global economic governance structures, leading us to putting on the agenda questions about what the right frame is to ask

questions about distribution and recognition. According to Fraser, today's key political question is how to 'integrate struggles against maldistribution, misrecognition and misrepresentation within a postwestphalian frame?' (2009, p. 21). The absence of a transnational public political space indeed poses challenges around how to represent children in global struggles such as against climate change or international legislation on child soldiering. When children are represented in transnational power struggles, it is not always easy to distinguish between innovative forms of international social movement activism and merely pretending doing so.

Discourses on the rights of the world's children tend to complicate rather than facilitate our understanding of children's representation at the transnational level. What strategies could be developed to find ways out of the maze? A first route is offered by Linda Alcoff's (1991) procedural solution to the problem of speaking for others. Alcoff looks for a middle ground between a non-critical, paternalist appropriation of the other (a pitfall in which many present-day children's rights advocacy campaigns are trapped) and a general retreat from speaking for others which would be both illusionary and politically ineffective (prohibiting transnational actors to speak in the name of the world's children). Her series of questions can assist in a concrete analysis and evaluation of specific power relations and discursive practices in transnational affairs concerning children. Looking critically at how much of the motivation to speak for others is about the desire for mastery and domination, or whether it is about something else. Next, we would need to interrogate how social location and context has an impact on what representatives are saying thereby taking care that this act of self-reflection does not make up a simple unanalysed disclaimer that would reinforce, rather than question, the speaker's authority. Finally, remain critical and include an analysis of the actual and probable effects of what is being said on the discursive and material context. Besides the social location of the speaker and the propositional content of the speech, it is important to look at the actual and potential effects of the claims that are being made.

Another possible escape route is to strengthen children's representation within the transnational entities that champion children's rights at the international level. The main strategic and operational decisions made within UNICEF are decided without any formal or informal representation of children. Who represents children within UNICEF? Referring to Stammers (2013), there is a need to strengthen democracy within international intergovernmental organisations that claim to represent children's



rights and interests. Can they find ways to include children's standpoints in their internal decision-making processes? In addition, can they make their internal decision-making procedures more transparent and clarify who influences the choices UNICEF makes? For instance, who decided when and how that climate change is an important theme for UNICEF? Increasing transparency about how representation decisions are being made is indeed a precondition to set in motion a series of changes to improve children's representation in transnational affairs. Similar questions about internal democracy also apply to international civil society organisations that are less closely associated with the exercise of state power and can hence be seen as more reliable, independent representatives of children's rights and interests in transnational affairs. Are organisations such as World Vision, Save the Children or Plan International, to name some of the largest global children's rights NGOs, more transparent about how decisions on children's representation are being made?

One of the main challenges for bringing internal democracy within these organisations is that they must deal with similar problems compared to their intergovernmental counterparts, namely that they are very closely related with entities that exercise transnational power. For example, can Save the Children, that in its corporate responsibility actions collaborates with multinational companies which have a revenue up to twenty times higher than their own, speak on behalf of children in transnational matters that are influenced by the entities that fund them? While much of the funding of global NGOs comes from States and intergovernmental donors, will they bite the hand that feeds them? Smaller non-governmental organisations might have greater potential to play an independent role in contesting transnational power. But is their lack of visibility and influence in the transnational political arena compensated by being more independent from the power they contest?

## CONCLUSION

International organisations that represent children's rights and interests, such as UNICEF, the ILO or international NGOs, present themselves as counterforces to transnational power which contribute to struggles for children's rights. Earlier research on priority themes in international children's rights advocacy has shown the pre-eminence of themes that deal with children's basic needs and the protection of their body over emancipatory concerns and children's claims for autonomy (Poretti et al., 2014).

Giving preference to defend these themes rather than others is not a twist of fate nor is it the outcome of a carefully conducted assessment of the rights that children want to focus upon. Making such choices illustrates that ‘speaking for others’ often originates from a desire for mastery and domination that is part of a political arena where who is speaking on behalf of whom is both the result of and an act of political struggle (Alcoff, 1991).

The present chapter has analysed some of the features of the transnational political arena where childhood and children’s rights matters are debated, using the examples of a transnational campaign on child soldiering and international litigation on climate change. It has also explored links between the transnational political forum and the roles and responsibilities of the entities that are claiming to represent children. We have seen that, given their close connection with international policy making on children, childhood and children’s rights, transnational campaigns and entities exert a significant part of the transnational public power against which they are struggling. This makes it important to critically assess who is speaking on behalf of children and where their representation is being performed. To find a way out of the transnational mirror maze, it is important to understand its complex and often confusing network of pathways and to design new routes that can help to critically reflect on children’s representation in world affairs.

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