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*Reconceptualizing Children’s Rights in International Development* is a timely book. Although the UN Millennium Development Goals celebrate their 15th birthday, and while the negotiations for the post-2015 agenda reach their final stage, there has yet to be any systematic analysis of the status of children’s rights in international development. The book therefore fills an important gap and offers a comprehensive and in times controversial analysis of this topic.

Contributing to the growing body of interdisciplinary childhood studies (James: 2010; Freeman: 2012; Alderson: 2012), and following recent work on children’s rights and international development (Denov, Maclure and Campbell: 2011), the 13 chapters included in this book criticise the traditional binary, top-down approach to children’s rights, wherein children’s rights are defined by international institutions (which are controlled by adults). The book offers an alternative bottom-up approach, which is based on a progressive, some might argue radical, reading of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), in particular Article 12. However, although the book focuses on international development, it is puzzling that none of the chapters engage with the child’s right to development (UNCRC Article 6).

The book develops three interrelated concepts: living rights, social justice and translation. The concept of ‘living rights’ suggests redefining children’s rights according to a more inclusive, less Westernised, idea of human rights (compare to Twining, 2009). A key feature of it is participation: asking children how they understand and prioritise their rights. ‘Living history’ is the expression of living rights. In her excellent chapter, Colette Daiute asserts that ‘living history’ relates to children’s perceptions of the ‘current political-economic situation... sometimes wrought of the past, and strategies for seizing opportunities towards a good life immediately and in the future’ (p. 187). ‘Translation’, the third concept, means ‘what happens with rights in the encounter of children’s and other actors’ perspective, movement for social justice and the elite, authorities and opponents’ (p. 17).

In this respect, two chapters are worth mentioning in particular, as they highlight the contribution of these three concepts to our understanding of children’s rights. Patricia Henderson’s chapter illuminates very well the implications of ignoring children’s ‘living rights’, ‘living history’ and ‘translation’ in development projects. Henderson describes a children’s rights workshop that was held in a rural part of South Africa. The facilitators, all dedicated NGO workers, overlooked the relationship between current conception of children’s
rights and local custom, and therefore ‘approached local communities with a degree of naivety...’ Moreover, they tended to dismiss ‘traditional’ ideas, considering them as having ‘no relevance to contemporary worlds and to efforts in forging a democratic state’ (p. 30). As a result, the local community, children and adults alike, saw children’s rights as an irrelevance to their lives. The result was the cultural changes that that NGO asked to bring did not happen.

Manfred Liebel’s chapter on the right to work movements discusses an interesting aspect of ‘living rights’ and ‘living history’. These movements are led by children and young adults, who demand that their right to work will not be limited by their age, so they will be able to support their families, afford education and fulfil their roles in their families and communities. In similar vein to critical development scholars (Kana et al, 2010), they reject the paternalistic approach that holds all forms of child labour as exploitative and therefore reject the legal structure that the UNCRC, especially Article 32, and the ILO Convention 182, impose (see Weiner, 1994). It is worth noting that their struggle to assume agency (Scullion, 2013) is very different from liberal model of human rights, which reject these restrictions on child labour, claiming that a globalised free market regime can regulate child labour in a manner that upholds children’s rights much better (Muntabhorn, 1998).

In his chapter Liebel demonstrates how ‘labour’, ‘exploitation’ and ‘slavery’ can be interpreted in a dynamic way, and the contribution of listening to the rights’ holders themselves, before restricting their freedom in the name of their interests and imagined needs. The question then is what should child’s rights advocates promote? Should the target be to eliminate all forms of child labour in favour of implementing UNCRC Article 28, which mandates compulsory primary education? Or should we rethink ‘child labour’ all together? The book suggests that the situation is more complex, and should not be perceived in binary terms. Similar questions can be asked, for example, about child marriage. Similarly to what Liebel describes, it can be argued that early marriage might also have some positive implications. On the one hand, child marriage prevents girls from going to school, and is often accompanied by domestic violence, denial of freedom and life of domestic work. On the other hand, it also promises social acceptability to some girls, provides them with a roof over their heads and some basic commodities. While many development NGOs who struggle against child marriage will not be happy to abandon their current agendas (see, for example, Davis, Postles and Rosa, 2013), the book’s framework offers a new way to engage with the complexity of these debates. Reconceptualising children’s rights according to the book’s suggestion highlights the importance of contextualising children’s rights to their lives, their society and their views about the world and about human rights. As such, the