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Early childhood in the Caribbean

By Christine Barrow with Martin Ince

Bernard van Leer ● *Foundation*

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About the author

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Executive summary

This report looks at the development and socialisation of children under 5 years of age in two Caribbean countries, Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica.

It involved fieldwork in four very different communities as well as extensive discussion with academics and professionals.

Too little is known about child socialisation in the Caribbean, and our research, we believe, breaks new ground. It shows that although most children are loved and cared for, the lives of many are scarred by poverty.

Poverty prevents many children in the communities we studied, and, we believe, in the region more widely, from developing to the full. It means, too, that the rights they have under the Convention on the Rights of the Child are rarely delivered in practice. As well as direct privation, poverty is a factor behind the fragmentation of families in the region often as a result of migration and the acute stress felt by many adults. This is reflected in the treatment of children; many children receive too little attention once they are past the stage of complete dependence on adults.

The two countries we worked in are by no means the poorest in the developing world. But they both have substantial poor populations. Poor families are offered only the most basic help by the state.

While both countries have strong school systems, care for younger children is often unavailable or unaffordable. In both countries substantial claims are made on funds available to the state due to persistent economic problems and environmental hazards such as hurricanes. This pressure is one that climate change threatens to exacerbate.

Child-rearing in the communities we studied remains highly traditional. Corporal punishment is common and children are often ignored, shouted at or belittled. Both countries have signed up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and their laws and policies pay attention to it. But the day-to-day lives of children have changed little. This applies particularly to children living in poverty, with a disability or with some other form of disadvantage.

But the picture is not one of unrelieved gloom. Child-rearing in the region does seem to be getting less regimented and more caring, and there is a growing realisation that the first few years of a child's life are vital to his or her social as well as intellectual and physical development. However, many of the people we met said that Caribbean communities are less supportive than in the past. This means that children are cared for increasingly by their mothers. Despite stereotypes of extended Caribbean families, many mothers are not involved in a wide network of female support. The feeling is that families are drawing in on themselves because

of cultural change, including more television watching, and the fear of crime, especially from gangs of drug-fuelled young men.

This might seem like an ominous development in the struggle for children to have their full human rights, including the right to take decisions for themselves when appropriate. But perhaps early child-rearing is part of the

solution to the problem of antisocial youth. In the longer term, there may be a growing appreciation that children whose early years have fed their moral, social and intellectual development, and who have been in a loving environment in which they were valued as individuals, are more likely to become valuable members of society as young people and adults.

Chapter 1: Introducing the study and the communities

This fieldwork-based study looks at the care and socialisation of children aged up to 5 in the two Caribbean island states of Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica. It has a focus on children at risk – the most pervasive and pernicious hazard for the young.

Caribbean children in these and other countries are rarely visible in research or in national policy. Even research on family and kinship, which sometimes cast a sideways light on them, is less important now in sociology than it was in the past.

In policy terms, the Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledges children's status and rights. But the global movement to improve their status and enhance their priority in national development plans or political agendas continues to fall short.

Except for some work done in Jamaica, research on the Caribbean region rarely mentions children. When they do appear, it is typically as older children whose deviant lifestyles or sexual habits threaten social order. We believe that these issues have their origin in early life and in the problems and issues we address here.

This introductory chapter starts by looking at three main constructs of early childhood. They are the scientific model rooted in research on early development and competencies, the rights perspective derived from the Convention, and the cultural model which privileges local ideas, knowledge and beliefs about children.

Then it provides background to the study's later chapters by looking at the emergence of childhood as a recognised part of the life course and at research on growth and development in early childhood. Finally in this chapter we introduce our research in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, explaining its approach and methodology and the questions we asked.

Constructs of childhood

Although childhood has long been recognised as a distinct phase of the human life course, children have only recently become a focus for research in their own right. The debate once involved a philosophical discussion of whether children are inherently 'good' or 'wicked', echoes of which continue to be heard. But the emphasis has now moved to more scientific studies of cognitive development.

At first these studies were based in psychology and came from the point of view that children all over the world develop in the same way. Later, psychologists came to appreciate that families, including their different levels of poverty and wealth, do have an effect on how children develop.

Even then, the assumption tended to be that families were a safe haven for children and offered them protection from the outside world. This meant that the wider community, of which the family formed part, was regarded as less significant in child development. Instead the family was regarded as providing for a child's every need including for food, shelter and the like, and to have knowledge and information poured into their receptive brains.

The mother was seen as central to this process and 'maternal deprivation' was regarded as a risk to children's development. In postwar Britain, mothers were pressured to withdraw from the workplace to help develop a stable society based on the family. If children turned out badly, their families, especially their mothers, were to blame, not the wider environment.

Thinking has now moved on again. We appreciate that although mothers are vitally important, children can also make significant attachments to other people. More importantly, we are aware that cultures differ widely in the ways they approach the universal task of bringing up children. Sociologists and anthropologists have uncovered a wide range of experiences of childhood around the world. Parents and other caregivers approach the task in many ways, and they value and consider children very differently in different cultures. Significantly for our purposes, researchers have also shown that poverty is a major obstacle to children's survival and development, and denies them their rights to protection, provision and participation in society.

From converging research in biology, psychology and sociology, we now know of the enormous progress children make in early life, especially in the first year. This is when the physical, cognitive, emotional, social and moral competencies that are crucial in later life begin to take shape. Physical and motor skills are developed alongside the abilities to communicate and socialise, to think, to understand and to take decisions. This grows children's ability to be in charge of their own lives.

This awareness of the importance of early life has led some scholars and practitioners to conclude that "8 is too late," and that a child's development has to be on a firm footing by then. This may not be the whole story. But there is evidence that children aged 12 who have been raised in a stimulating environment have better brain function than those whose early life has been stressful and are at risk of behavioural, cognitive or emotional problems. Children who have been deprived of human interaction have major and long-lasting deficits in speech and language.

These insights have spawned a world industry in 'early intervention,' a range of programmes intended to stimulate the child and help its life progress. Early child development is a professional subdiscipline of psychology, medicine, sociology and social work, with its own specialist researchers and practitioners. This new approach has led to children being regarded as active agents in their own lives. They are seen as having rights, for example as in the Convention, even though the translation

of these ideas into specific cultures remains problematic.

Child-rearing is a conservative process. Inserting ideas about children's rights into a process that regards them as junior members of a living community is bound to be difficult. In addition, many people regard families as autonomous units that the state, much less an international treaty, has no business to interfere in.

But child-rearing is not a completely immutable set of practices and beliefs. It changes over time and new research insights can affect how people do it. And even within particular societies, people vary in their ideas and practices for bringing up children.

In future there may be more awareness about how child-rearing varies around the world. But such knowledge may have a cost. In the countries we studied, many poor single mothers struggle massively to bring up their children. They may find it demoralising to be presented with ideals of best practice in child-rearing that they have no way of matching.

The emergence of childhood

Childhood emerged as a concept in European culture in the 15th century. Before then, children were regarded as miniature adults with small bodies. They joined in adult pursuits including work and there were no childhood activities with games or toys. They were exposed to the full reality of adult life and were subject to social indifference and perhaps even hostility. Some

writers suggest that child-rearing was regarded merely as an investment in a future asset. However, it is unlikely that mothers and fathers took such a cynical and detached view of their children as such accounts may suggest.

In the Caribbean, childhood was further damaged by the institution of slavery. Child mortality was high amongst slaves and slave-owners found it cheaper to import slaves, than to allow their existing ones to bring up children.

These attitudes eased after the slave trade was abolished in the British Empire in 1807. Encouraging slaves to reproduce themselves was essential to the survival of the system. Even then, children as young as 4 had to work and 10-year-olds were full members of the plantation workforce.

This poor treatment of children continued after slavery was abolished in 1838 (Emancipation) and, in Trinidad and Tobago during the era of indentured labour[1]. During the 20th century, the expectation grew that children would be educated rather than work. While some children were homeless and displaced, most were valued and loved. As well as early childhood, adolescence started to be regarded as a distinct life phase.

Around the world, societies have become more child-centred and children are seen as vulnerable people in need of protection. Legal and social provision for their welfare, including their health and education, has become more common. Measures to protect them have been put in place, including steps to ensure their

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[1] *1838–1917*

safety within the family. One measure of this approach is the spread of playgrounds and other spaces where children can be children separate from the adult world.

At the same time, parenthood has also become a recognised life phase – usually for young adults. Our growing awareness of child development has added to the expectations that parents will provide a growing range of inputs and stimuli to children, and not just to cater for their basic needs. Fathers, in particular, are now expected to provide more comfort and nurturing than in the past as well as material and financial support.

We also know more clearly that listening to children, and encouraging their ability to express themselves and take decisions, are important.

Research is now highlighting parenting styles and practices. It tends to show that children's lives are often very far removed from anything that international law, or current research, would regard as ideal. Many children are brought up in households that are too poor to provide for their material well-being, or to offer them a loving and safe environment, or to allow parents to consult and involve them actively. There is a widespread feeling that children 'grow up too fast' and are exposed to the wider world, directly and via the media, at too young an age.

Many Caribbean states now have compulsory schooling until age 16. Family planning has cut teenage pregnancy, although it is still a social issue. But problems remain, especially teenagers' involvement in a culture that exposes them to

crime, alcohol and other drugs, violence and early sexual initiation. Some babies are born to young parents who may be unable to care for them and who may be drug addicts or HIV positive.

Studying childhood

Until the 19th century, children tended to be regarded as empty vessels for adults to fill. And then developmental psychology emerged as a discipline, with a focus on social, cognitive and emotional development. At first it adopted a fixed and universal model in which children were all supposed to develop on the same schedule. This idea had the disadvantage of under- or overestimating what individuals could achieve. It also stigmatised people with disabilities and anyone not brought up in the Western culture where the model was developed.

More recently we have come to realise that this approach regards children as incompetent, dependent and incomplete. It viewed children as being incapable of rational thought until a particular age and as having needs but not rights.

While we still think that children have distinct stages of development, our awareness is growing that they are not a homogeneous group and develop in different ways and at different speeds.

This view is reflected in constructionist models that regard children as members of the society they live in. Such models are based on ideas and images of childhood, and on the meanings that people use to understand and act in the world. They are comfortable with the idea of social and

cultural variety. Even apparent absolutes such as age or disability are seen differently in different cultures. This means that ideas about childhood have gone from an extreme that insisted that all children are the same, to an opposite at which their development is seen as completely culturally dependent and nothing universal can be said about it.

From this perspective, childhood is what society thinks it is. It exists mainly as the opposite of adulthood, so 'generation' is as important a concept as 'gender' is for feminists. It points to children's low status and to adults' power over them.

Studies of Caribbean childhood

There is no systematic Caribbean sociology of childhood. Children, especially young children, have only become a focus of research in the past decade. Before that, the focus was on the importance of women and the marginality of men in Caribbean households. The stress was on family breakdown and children appeared mainly as victims. They were prey to erratic socialisation at best and neglect or violence in all too many cases.

The introduction of a feminist framework for political thinking and social research brought with it the assumption that children were cared for by women who would both 'mother' and 'father' them and protect them from the effects of poverty using supportive female networks to do so. On this model, children appear mainly in a statistical guise as recipients of health,

education and other services, or, in studies of children at risk, as missing out on these services.

Children are now becoming more of a focus for research in the Caribbean. There is work on their care and nurture, how they play and are stimulated, and how they learn and are socialised. But the emphasis tends to be on children's needs rather than on their rights or their development in a full sense, and on children at risk rather those living more usual lives.

The next stage of this research should place more emphasis on children's daily existence, including their interactions with adults, and on the cultural and domestic context of children's daily existence. Influences that ought to be mapped include poverty and unemployment in households, the role of state bodies and non-governmental organisations (NGO), the physical environment and its hazards, and social unrest.

Our research

Our work in Trinidad and Tobago primarily involved collecting qualitative data at household and community level. We wanted to understand local ideas about children and childhood, and about child socialisation. We were less concerned with children's capacities and developmental achievement than with how their abilities are interpreted and their behaviour evaluated.

This meant observing families, mothers and children in their immediate environment, including the home, pre-school provision and the community. We also examined the policy

environment for children, including those in poverty or otherwise at risk. We found that while national policies have paid attention to the Convention, the same certainly cannot be said of day-to-day practices.

However, it also became apparent that children's welfare is strongly dependent upon economic and social stability, in other words upon factors in the realm of the nation.

The countries

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin island state made up of the Caribbean chain's two most southerly islands. Dominica is at the centre of the chain and is a single island. They are small island developing states, as recognised by the United Nations, with a common history dominated by colonisation and slavery. Trinidad and Tobago has a high level of concern about violent crime, drugs, kidnappings and other forms of social disorder. Dominica has a more secure climate socially, but not environmentally. It is in the track of Caribbean hurricanes which cause extensive damage. Trinidad and Tobago is south of the track but is still prone to floods and earthquakes.

Economically, Trinidad and Tobago is an oil producer and the richest economy in the region. Dominica has been badly affected by the collapse of its banana industry. Both countries have populations founded in immigration, including the descendants of slaves and indentured labourers, while Dominica has a small Carib population descended from the area's pre-Columbian inhabitants. Both

countries have high levels of poverty which state support only partly alleviates. Although they have both ratified the Convention their children are yet to enjoy many of the rights it guarantees.

The communities

We studied two communities in each country. They show a mix of ethnicity (Afro-Caribbean, Carib and Indo-Caribbean), wealth and poverty, vulnerability and urban and rural settings.

In Trinidad, we looked at Trincity and Caroni, while in Dominica we looked at Tarish Pit and Atkinson.

Trincity is a planned development of 6,000 households near Port of Spain, the capital. About half of the people are of African descent and they tend to be managers and other professionals. It was founded in 1970 and has few old people. It is well-resourced, as shown by the fact that the state primary school is poorly attended as parents tend to send their children to fee-paying schools. There are about 10 pre-school centres.

Trincity is well supplied with amenities such as power, clean water, sewerage and telecommunications. Homes are modern. But the newness of the development means that there are few social networks and little community spirit. Indeed, people feel vulnerable to crime and have steadily installed more alarms, guard dogs and other security measures.

Caroni is a small rural community in central Trinidad. Its historic base was the Caroni sugar

plantation run by the British firm Tate and Lyle. The estate was worked by indentured labourers, brought in from India after Emancipation, who received small amounts of land after working off their indenture.

Caroni has about 2,000 people mainly of Indo-Caribbean ethnicity and was badly damaged economically by the closure of the plantation in 2004. Many of the men are now employed in small businesses and most women identify themselves as housewives. Many young adults have emigrated, often to the US or Canada. Caroni has a primary school and two pre-school centres. The population is young with many children, and there are plans for a secondary school.

Caroni is poorer than Trincity but has good basic utilities including public transport. Houses may be substantial but there are also wooden shacks with outside toilets. There are some definite hazards such as floods and dumped rubbish. But people are generally healthy and there is a nearby health clinic. Most people in Caroni were born there and like the place. They regard it as safe and harmonious.

Tarish Pit is one of the poorest places in Dominica. It was set up by squatters in 1979 after Hurricane Andrew had devastated their homes and land. Their status has now largely been legalised. Yampiece, an adjacent area, was added in 1999 when more people were displaced by another hurricane.

Tarish Pit is a recent development and its population of about 2,000 is young with many children. There is overcrowding, which is partly relieved by emigration. There is also little work, especially for women. Multiple jobs are common and many people depend on remittances from abroad. There is no land for the traditional fallback of subsistence farming. Perhaps as a result, people claim that crime, especially drug-dealing, is an option for the young. Support for children is provided by two church-based charities.

There are primary and secondary schools and a clinic within walking distance, but the area provides a poor local environment in terms of housing and sanitation.

Tarish Pit has a poor reputation and its inhabitants often deny that they live there, as for example when looking for work. Most think it is unsafe and would leave if they had the choice. There is little community spirit and even the police are said to stay away.

Atkinson is a coastal community in north-eastern Dominica. About 400 people live there, mainly descendants of those who benefited from the will of an estate owner. Many young people have left, leaving behind an ageing population with few children. The community is partly in Carib Territory and many of the residents are of Carib origin.

Farming is the main economic activity but many people have had to seek work elsewhere and there is high unemployment, especially of women. Poverty is evident and several families depend upon charitable support.

Atkinson has a public health clinic and one state-run and one private primary school. Children go to a nearby secondary school. There is one pre-school but the fees are too high for most people unless they have support.

Atkinson has a clean environment and the houses are well-equipped, although electricity and other utilities are sometimes cut off for non-payment. Most local residents are related and find Atkinson a friendly and secure place whose few problems, they say, are caused by outsiders.

Methodology

We began by examining the national and community contexts for early childhood in the four areas, and investigating their beliefs and practices about children and their development. We built up a profile of each community and then carried out a 'knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and practices' survey in each, with a sample of 50 families per community. We also specifically surveyed at-risk families and children.

Next we sought information on children in families. We got this by asking parents and others what they do day-to-day with their children and by observing them in action. We were especially interested in adult–child communication and in patterns of care, stimulation and discipline. The effect of poverty on family strategies was a focus of this part of the project.

All this work was done to a high ethical standard by avoiding financial inducement, by explaining what was being done, and by avoiding or

stopping activities that were intrusive. But the researchers could not remain in the background all the time and were sometimes inevitably drawn in to the families they were observing.

We do not claim to have produced anything more than a preliminary anthropology of childcare in the communities we observed. But as the research went on and people got used to us, we were able to gather better information. We made use of local 'community advisers', one per community, to act as gatekeepers and consultants.

This work with families was followed up by structured focus groups with child development professionals, and visits to pre-school centres and children's homes. These were followed in turn by in-depth interviews with 26 professionals in fields such as medicine, education and social care and by structured observations and interviews at 13 pre-schools and day care centres. This third level of the research involved a literature review and extensive dialogue with academics involved in child development and children's rights in the Caribbean and globally, and an analysis of state and other documentation on children in both countries.

Value judgements

While social scientists now have a welcome awareness of a wider range of cultures than in the past, they have still tended to judge 'other' cultures against a Western standard.

In the Caribbean, cultures and practices have been written off as 'dysfunctional' or

'abnormal.' Nor has this been a merely academic condemnation. Children have been sent to orphanages as a result of such judgements.

We now appreciate that there is not a universal model for childcare and that different cultures value different aspects of human potential. Academics have more or less abandoned the idea of comparing cultures in order to rank them.

Researchers in the Caribbean now see the value of extended family networks in ways they previously did not. But there is still controversy about just how different cultures operate and how cultural practices should be assessed.

Cultural clashes do not surface only when foreign experts fly in. The professionals we met in both countries often criticised parents for the failings rather than praising them for what they were achieving with limited resources, while the parents themselves realised that what they were doing was imperfect.

But although it is wrong to stigmatise people and what they do unnecessarily, we also realise that some family practices do put children at more risk than others. There are some absolutes including the basics of nutrition and shelter, and the connection between poverty and a hazardous life for children.

We need to keep challenging practices such as corporal punishment, discrimination against girls or against people with disabilities, and the ways in which children are shut away or ignored. Children do have rights, and they are all too often denied.

Research questions

The following set of core questions was formulated to focus and guide the research and to interrogate the findings:

1. How does care and socialisation take place during interactions between young children and their parents and other caregivers? What qualities and competencies are emphasised?

2. What beliefs, values and priorities concerning the development of young children are embodied in local cultural constructs of childhood? Within these constructions, how are children's evolving capacities imaged and what, if any, evidence is there of the principle of child rights and 'scientific' knowledge of child development?

3. What impact does the immediate environment have on childcare and socialisation? What are the effects of the family, patterns of mothering and fathering, and the physical and spatial setting of the home and community?

4. How, within the macro socio-economic and political environment of Trinidad and Dominica, have children's rights to provision, protection and participation been recognised and implemented by the state?

5. What impact does the lived environment of poverty and insecure livelihoods, crime and violence, hazardous and unsafe communities, migration and family fragmentation have on children's development and the realisation of their rights? Do state, NGO and other official provisions, and family strategies to alleviate poverty mitigate the impact?

6. How can we ensure the optimum development and rights of the young child by developing and implementing practices of early childhood care and socialisation that build on local strengths and traditions, and respond to prevailing challenges and limitations?

Chapter 2: Early childhood, care and socialisation

The upbringing of children has been one of the perennial concerns of parents, across cultures and across the generations. The many different approaches taken are among the most distinctive features of the world's diverse cultures.

Childcare practices are directed at children by adults, with the aim of ensuring that children become effective adults in the society to which they belong. But the behaviour of particular carers is not determined solely by the culture to which they belong. Mothers who hit or hug a child may do so because of their own early life experiences, even if they belong to cultures which disapprove of corporal punishment or which discourage demonstrations of affection. And child-rearing is not a constant in time any more than it is in space. At present, attitudes to children may be changing in such a way that in many parts of the world, children are regarded as less dependent on adults than in the past. This may lead adults to give them more power to take important decisions about their own lives.

Despite cultural variations, there seems to be near-universal agreement about what constitutes a 'good' child: they are well-behaved, obedient, uncomplaining and cooperative and make their parents and communities proud. But here again, there are no absolutes. Some cultures allow children to run around and make all the noise they like; while in others this is regarded as bad behaviour. Some value children's dress and appearance as proof of their parents'

affluence and care, while others do not. Some attach high value to children's social interaction, while others prefer to emphasise academic achievement. Expectations of children alter as they age and it is common for expectations of girls to differ from those for boys.

Whatever the exact details, this ideal automatically penalises children who do not match up to it. Children from minority groups are often thought to be less capable, less honest or less socially able than majority children. The same applies to children with special physical or mental needs. They can be isolated or stigmatised, and governments tend to be poor at providing the resources they need. Such children are often the first victims of any perceived shortage of resources.

Child-rearing is inherently conservative, and this can be a problem in a fast-changing world. The methods that worked for today's adults may not be ideal for children who will live as adults in a multicultural world with rapid technological change. Parents may not be aware of these demands, and if they are, they may not know how to handle them. They may apply inappropriately old-fashioned methods and regard a modern child's frequent questions as a nuisance.

This problem is exacerbated all over the world by child-rearing practices, both at home and in school, which encourage obedience and rote learning and prohibit questioning, and where

children only learn what adults think they need to know. This passive role is especially marked in the rearing of girls, who are often expected to turn from 'good' children into 'good' wives and mothers. Boys are allowed to be more adventurous, both physically and intellectually. At the same time, children who are regarded as 'ugly' or otherwise second-rate receive less attention than their siblings.

Our contemporary ideas of childhood date back to European debates of 300–400 years ago. Here children were seen either as inherently wild and sinful (the position of Thomas Hobbes, 1588–1679) or inherently innocent (the view of Jean Jacques Rousseau, 1712–1778). This view is still current when we speak of the 'stolen childhood' of children at risk. John Locke (1632–1704) took the view that children could turn out either well or badly, depending on their life experience, and assigned to adults the responsibility for ensuring the right result.

In the modern era, these positions express themselves in the 'welfare' and 'justice' models of child-rearing. In the first, children who are properly protected and cared for will grow up fine, with some guidance when they go astray. In the second, they need to be restricted and subjected to adult authority, and may well revert to animal brutality if left to themselves.

The common aim of all child socialisation is to prepare children to be adults. But contemporary child-rearing tends to give children themselves a bigger role in this process than in the past, giving them more scope to make sense of the world for themselves and putting less emphasis on adults telling them about it. This means that adults have less of a moral and regulatory role than in the past, and are more involved in keeping children safe and allowing them opportunities, for example for play and for education, which children themselves can make the most of. But there are significant differences between cultures. In one study comparing American and East African children, it was noted that African children are usually in the company of adults, but typically in an unremarked way, while American children are either isolated from adults or are with them in a very intense way, with a large amount of praise and other comment.

Studies of child socialisation, including this one, naturally focus upon the interaction between children and adults. Our study looked at children up to age 5 – a stage at which mothers or other primary care givers, are of special importance.

The four main issues we looked at were care and comfort of children, communication, discipline, and play and stimulation. These areas were emphasised either because they are existing concerns for professionals in the field or because they emerged as important during the course of our research. We examined these issues in our four fieldwork areas and then went on to see how the practices we found compare with the growing world emphasis on children's rights.

Early childhood in the Caribbean

Virtually all Caribbean children start life with an enormous advantage – they are wanted,

loved and cared for. Terms such as 'joy,' 'blessing,' 'precious' and 'fun' emerge in families' description of their children. People expect to be affectionate to their children. Childlessness as an active life choice is a mysterious concept to most Caribbean people.

But even in this loving and child-centred setting, an 'ugly' or disabled baby is regarded as less desirable and can mean shame for the family. Likewise, a child born into a large family can be regarded as an undesirable extra mouth to feed, while children are less welcome if they are born into family poverty. In addition, children have an instrumental value as well as being loved in their own right. For example, they are insurance for old age and a vessel for handing on the family name.

Care and comfort

In all these communities, feeding children and looking after their appearance, especially their hair and clothes, are key parts of a daily routine. Mealtimes tend not to be highly structured. Instead, children are breastfed or given solid food on request, and there is little communication about their needs. Likewise we observed that the task of attending to children's appearance was carried out in a highly functional manner and nobody, child or adult, seemed to enjoy it much. It was not used as an opportunity for intergenerational fun, reassurance or communication. It often seemed to be very adult-focussed rather than child-centric. While parents attach importance to making sure children are well-dressed, childcare professionals often criticise the amount of

clothing that children are made to wear in tropical conditions. Parents also spend a lot of time tending their children's hair, although the children often find this attention unwelcome.

Parents are often under pressure, especially if they have many small children. They soon learn to tell when a child is in genuine need and when it is simply seeking attention. If they think they are not needed urgently, adults can ignore children in favour of adult conversation or the TV. But parents are also proud of their children's achievements and may tend to overestimate them. They are keen for their children to speak like adults, and correct 'baby talk' even in the very young. They also encourage politeness, with 'please,' 'thank you,' 'sorry' and 'excuse me' instilled from an early age, and a 'rude' child is a source of shame for the family.

Discipline

Our work showed that discipline was the main form of interaction between parents and children. Children were constantly told what to do or not do and were punished for disobedience. Physical punishment is common, even of young children, although bad behaviour by the very young is indulged.

There is evidence over time to suggest that child discipline in the communities we studied becomes more severe as parents prepare their children for school. However, there is also a suggestion that the very severe beatings of yesteryear, even of quite young children, have been replaced by more modest forms of punishment. As well as less severe physical

punishment, this can include sending children to their rooms or depriving them of toys or the TV for a while.

Almost all of the discipline applied to young children comes from their mothers. Fathers, by contrast, are usually seen to be spoiling and indulging their children, undermining mothers' efforts at discipline.

But the picture is not one of uniform blame and punishment. Children are often indulged and encouraged, sometimes soon after being punished.

Play and stimulation

Caribbean cultures of childhood do not emphasise play. Mothers do not regard it as a central part of their role, and only get involved when things get out of hand and discipline is needed. Instead, their stress is on catering for children's physical needs, life skills and appearance. Play is often regarded as a distraction and a potential problem, perhaps making children and their homes dirty and untidy. A child is likely to be praised for playing quietly and doing this on his or her own.

The availability of toys varies widely according to family wealth. Poor families have few toys and regard those they have as precious, keeping them away from children except under supervision. Richer families have more toys and parents can afford a more relaxed attitude to the wear and tear the toys receive. When children of richer families reach the age of around 2 or 3, they also tend to receive more educational toys

intended to help their passage to pre-school education.

There is some limited evidence of a gender divide in play. Boys play more roughly and boisterously and are discouraged from play considered too 'sissy' and feminine.

Instead of encouraging play, Caribbean parents tend to push children to be helpful around the house, running errands, tidying up or fetching things. By the age of 5, they are often involved in caring for younger siblings.

The ideal child

All cultures have an idea of what a child should be like. In the Caribbean cultures we studied, the concept has four main elements. They are:

- development and motor skills
- behaviour
- social skills
- academic ability.

In the first of these categories, children are praised for being active and attractive. In the second, being tidy and helpful are positive attributes. In the third, having good manners, being quiet and being respectful to adults are all regarded as desirable, as are being friendly and loving. In terms of academic ability, being quick to learn, alert and understanding are all seen as positive.

The other side of this coin is that not all children can match this ideal. Many mothers express concern that their children may turn out 'spoilt,' or in Dominican creole *betant*. Such

children are seen as excessively dependent on adults, picky eaters, and as miserable and fussy. Fathers are especially likely to be blamed for indulging and spoiling children. Some selfish behaviour is acceptable in very young children; but letting older ones 'have their own way' carries a high risk of over-indulgence which may result in a spoilt child. Because children tend to be born less than three years apart, they are often quite young when a new sibling arrives and attention switches to the new family member. This means that children of this age are often under strong pressure to fend for themselves.

In Dominica, children who do not fit in are regarded as 'troublesome', which can involve being too demanding, being violent, not sleeping, being disobedient, and not listening to their parents. In general, troublesome children want too much attention, perhaps even including breastfeeding, from their parents. However, there is nothing consistent about the way in which this behaviour is characterised, and it is sometimes regarded as just innocent mischief.

For the special case of disabled children there seem to be differing practices with some of them being neglected and hidden away, whilst others are generally pampered and 'spoilt'.

The global construct of childhood

These changing Caribbean ideas of childhood do not exist in isolation. There is a changing world context for the ways in which we think about children and their development.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations in 1989. It set a high standard for the treatment of children, including their socialisation and their relations with adults. The Convention encodes children's long-accepted rights to the provision of education, health and welfare, and to be protected from harm. It defines these as 'rights' rather than needs. It also adds an extra set of rights for children to participate in decisions about their lives, and builds in rights to affection and freedom from corporal punishment.

This view of children has wide implications for their care, development and socialisation. They are no longer seen as dependent or incompetent. Although the Convention acknowledges adults' role in guiding and directing children, adults are called on to help children develop, not to tell them how to do it. Adults are not meant to subject children to discrimination on the basis of their beliefs, while children with special needs, such as refugees or children with disabilities, are identified as being vulnerable.

Young children are especially vulnerable, but they have not been a major focus of the discussion and development of the Convention in the 19 years of its life so far. We believe that early childhood development, and the rights of the very young child, should be stressed in the next phase of the Convention's development.

Participation, evolving capacities and resilience
Participation and evolving capacities are central concepts in the Convention and are of special

interest to our work in Trinidad and Dominica. Resilience is a concept which has recently become important in the child development literature.

The English text of the Convention does not use the word 'participation,' but makes it clear at many points that children have the right to have opinions and take decisions about their lives when they are capable of doing so.

In many countries, this emphasis on participation has worked its way into practice in schools, where children's views on the curriculum and other aspects of school life are taken more seriously than in the past. The same applies to children's rights to be informed and listened to during medical care. But there has been less progress towards encouraging children's participation at home and in the community at large.

Where children have been listened to properly, their views have been compellingly interesting, for example on the subject of violence. We also know that children who are allowed to express themselves are less likely than others to be the victims of violence or other forms of exploitation. So participation moves the agenda for children, and the adults around them, from the provision of goods such as a safe environment and into the arena of justice and rights.

The Convention recognises that children's capacities evolve, for example, by saying that their views should be taken into account "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." The capacities recognised in this context are physical as well as mental, moral and emotional.

This approach contrasts with that of most national legislation, which incorporates specific ages for activities such as voting, marrying, giving sexual consent or for being responsible for having committed a crime. Of particular importance is the right to confidentiality, such as the age at which someone can seek medical treatment without their parents being informed.

These legal minimum ages pose a number of problems, especially in the developing world. The Convention regards anyone under 18 as a child, while in some Caribbean countries, employment can start at 12 and criminal responsibility at 7. In some countries, people can marry at below the age of sexual consent. More subtly, the idea of evolving capacities challenges the whole idea of legal thresholds across all age groups.

Different cultures place different demands and expectations on people at different ages. Some value social development more than intellectual progress, while others do the opposite. Parents react to these expectations by stressing different aspects of their children's development.

Allied to these concepts is the idea of resilience, helping a child to cope with adversity and problems so that his or her agency over the surrounding world is enhanced. The literature in this area has examined both risk factors and the protective factors which enhance a child's

ability to deal with these risks. Risk factors can be external hazards such as war or poverty, while protective factors can include external structures such as family as well as internal ones such as mental stability and adaptability.

This approach is a valuable one as it allows children who are at risk to be the focus of special attention.

The Convention in action

Although 193 countries have ratified it, much of the support for the Convention around the world has been at a rhetorical rather than a practical level. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, set up to ensure its implementation, is better at helping states to enforce it than at punishing those that do not. Many countries have been slow to think how to implement the Convention, and there are few penalties for not doing so.

The main problem with implementing the Convention is often said to be the gap between its global expectations and the actual practices of individual nations.

Some critics say that the Convention is an attack on developing world cultural values, in effect globalising and Westernising the ways in which children should be treated, rather than celebrating different approaches to this universal conundrum.

The Convention was, however, written to avoid such accusations. Its preamble includes the phrase "taking due account of the importance of the traditions and cultural values of each people," while the text refers approvingly to such ideas as "ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background." But in practice, controversy has remained. Only a few states, mainly in Europe, have banned the corporal punishment of children, as the Convention mandates. More broadly, there has been a sense in the developing world, articulated in the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, that children should be regarded, not as autonomous individuals, but as members of families and communities with their rights balanced by responsibilities.

Supporters of the Convention argue that it has come from the UN, not some aggressive colonial power, and that some sort of global approach is indeed justified to prevent the many abuses of children that occur all over the world. However, critics point out that the Convention can lead to unintended bad consequences. If children are prevented from working they may be placed in institutions or driven into illegal work that is more dangerous and exploitative than the work that it replaced.

The Convention in the Caribbean

The Convention was welcomed in the Caribbean area. All the Commonwealth countries in the region ratified it by 1993. But governments in the area did not think clearly about the implications of implementation.

There have been many positives. The Convention has led to children being more visible and their interests being spelled out in national plans.

Child development and protection have been encouraged. There have been policy, legislative, budgetary and institutional reforms, and provision for vulnerable children has been enhanced.

However, the rights of children to participate in decisions about their own lives have yet to be fully developed in Caribbean countries. And the emergence of children's rights in law and social policy has yet to be mirrored in the daily world of families and communities.

Many cultures find problematic the Convention's idea of children as active participants in their own lives. This notion flies in the face of their perception of children as dependent, immature and incapable creatures who need to be represented by adults. African cultures take an even more subtle view of these issues. As we have said, they often regard both children and adults more as members of a community than as autonomous individuals. Although legal systems recognise the importance of communities as well as of individual people, there are, however, no simple solutions to this conundrum.

This issue arises in a particularly intractable form in parent–child relations, and especially for children under 5. Anyone this young is inherently dependent, and adults rarely think that such young children can take important decisions for themselves.

In the Trinidadian and Dominican communities we studied, parents and other adults who are responsible for children have well-formed ideas

about child development and what a child should be able to do at what age. While adults are not completely rigid about these matters, they have a strong sense that, for example, a 'slow' child needs extra attention.

In both Trinidad and Dominica, the recent growth of formal pre-school care has led to changes in early child-rearing. Children must be ready to succeed in this setting by age 3, which means that informal care at a very early age is soon replaced by more fixed priorities. These include the physical, such as toilet training, the academic, such as talking properly and knowing numbers and letters, and the behavioural, including obedience and good manners. As well as preparation for pre-school, this training is seen as paving the way for the transition to successful adulthood.

So the early lives of children in the four areas we studied are dominated by their being handed skills, knowledge and behaviours, not by their expressing opinions that are listened to, even about their own concerns.

However, it is also apparent that the under-5s are implementing the Convention in their own ways. Even very young children have a range of facial expressions, gestures and sounds that make adults aware of their wishes. Mothers are especially good at knowing what they mean. Children adopt effective strategies, from silence to tantrums, to get what they want, and ignore instructions they dislike. Adults have an appreciation of children's developing autonomy. They often encourage children to take non-

critical decisions, for example on which toy to play with where there is a choice, and praise their growing capacity in areas such as reading, dressing or being helpful around the home.

As we have seen, corporal punishment, sometimes severe, is still common in the areas we studied. This is the biggest gap between Caribbean practice and the requirements of the Convention, which explicitly forbids all forms of physical and mental violence. Violence against Caribbean children is encouraged by the public perception of older children as being a social problem, typically as members of violent criminal gangs, often fuelled by alcohol and other drugs. Parents often feel that only severe discipline will keep their children from such a future.

This extreme behaviour towards children is reported by many social workers in the area. They report children being 'beaten,' 'flogged' or 'shouted at' for minor offences at a young age, including trivia such as 'crying too much.' Though this language of punishment overstates the reality, parents there seem to agree with Hobbes that children are likely to slip into animal-like behaviour unless steps are taken to keep them on the straight and narrow.

It is in this area that the Convention has had least effect in the Caribbean area. Trinidad and Tobago is the only country in the area to have banned corporal punishment in schools. Physical punishment of children, including the under-5s, is the norm in homes and communities all across the Caribbean.

In the areas where we worked, emotional as well as physical abuse of children was common, including threats and belittling comments. These actions are often not regarded as wrong within local culture. Also children may be neglected and left alone. Furthermore, a study in Jamaica showed that sexual abuse is often regarded as culturally normal.

In all these communities, a strong approach to bringing up children was regarded as essential. Parents with "troublesome" children were often thought to be the authors of their own problems, which were said to have resulted from excessive leniency.

There are mixed signs about current trends in Caribbean child-rearing. It seems that some of the discipline now being applied to young children is less violent than in the past. Especially in Trinidad, parents seem to explain themselves to children more than they once did. However, children still seem to have little opportunity to form and act upon their own opinions. Things still happen the way parents want them to, even if there is a little more give and take about the details than in the past. During daily routines, orders and discipline are favoured over play, comforting behaviour or engagement. Sometimes children are allowed to hurt themselves to let them learn from experience, especially if they are regarded as 'hard ears' and will not do as they are told.

Cultural constructions of childhood are often regarded as underestimating children's

capacities and putting constraints on their development and rights. In the communities we observed, we saw some cases where parents did not provide enough autonomy for children, and others in which they exposed them to the adult world to a surprising extent, for example by letting them see TV programmes, or hear conversations, from which we might expect them to be protected. Certainly some children are expected to take on tasks that are beyond them, especially in poor families where young girls can be called upon to look after siblings for long periods when their mothers are out.

In summary

It is never easy to balance children's rights and parental responsibilities, especially for very young children who are inherently dependent upon adults. The key problem is to help children to make choices for themselves, while protecting them from the consequences when they get it wrong.

No society in the world has solved this problem. But those we have studied seem to attach more value to discipline and the powers of adults than many others deem necessary, and less to the rights and abilities of children.

The groups we worked with are far from homogeneous. In Dominica, only one mother we met had attended parenting classes. Others had read books on the matter, or received advice from priests, paediatricians, nurses, teachers and others. But most of this advice was in terms of dos and don'ts, not thoughtful information on children's changing capacities.

Single mothers, often living in poverty with several children, were especially unlikely to have the leisure for deep thought about their developing potential for autonomous action. But even parents in well-resourced households can struggle to understand contradictory advice, or can worry that lower levels of discipline today might mean unruly children tomorrow.

Chapter 3: Family and the local environment for childhood

The importance of the wider environment on children's development, and sometimes even their survival, is now acknowledged more fully than ever. As well as the environment in ecological terms, the influences that fall under this definition can include health, welfare and educational provision, political and economic systems, social, religious and legislative frameworks, family, and in extreme cases, peace and war. These aspects of a child's environment interact with each other. In the next two chapters we look first at the effects of the local and family environment on the developing child, and then at the effects of the national setting, with reference to our studies of Trinidad and Dominica.

A growing number of studies have looked at the effects on children of parental stress, social deprivation, crime, violence and poverty. Of these, poverty is especially damaging. It restricts parents' abilities to meet social expectations for their children as well as the child's ability to participate in society to the full. Poverty limits communities and families to providing only the basics such as food and shelter, and prevents them from thinking about wider aspects of child development. Social instability is also damaging to children. In an unstable society, children, especially younger ones, tend to be confined to the home because parents fear for their safety.

Studies of childhood

Sociology and anthropology have been reluctant to regard children as legitimate objects of study, and have preferred to look at entire families or households. Children have mainly been studied as objects of socialisation, with the focus being on what adults say about them rather than directly on children. This is still true of the social sciences in the Caribbean. Here studies of families dominated the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, there has been a stress on studying women in society. This has led to an emphasis on children as a burden on women, in the same category as paid work and household duties.

In general, early child development has been studied mainly from a medical and psychological perspective, seeing the child from within rather than as a member of society. This has led to models of child development being favoured which discount the importance of local culture. Many were developed in a single society and from small samples. As Helen Penn has put it: "If child development patterns are universal, it does not matter too much where the research is carried out." In practice, the children studied have usually been white Europeans and North Americans.

In recent years there has been welcome progress in studies of child development. Social and

cultural aspects are being studied as well as biological and psychological ones. Children are more likely to be listened to directly. Researchers and child care professionals also appreciate more clearly that children's early years are vitally important, and that young children need caring and enabling environments as well as basics such as food and shelter. Perhaps more importantly, we now see children as active participants in their own lives, not just as recipients of care and socialisation provided by adults.

Despite this growing sensibility towards children as actors in their own lives, there is still a shortage of ethnographic studies of children in their specific environments. Perhaps as a result, there is often a stress on 'abnormal' families and on the 'failure' of parents, usually mothers, to bring up children properly. There is far less knowledge of the structures and constraints that complicate child-rearing, such as poverty, poor employment opportunities, poor childcare or enforced single parenting.

In the communities we studied, families and especially mothers are of vital importance to under-5s. They spend almost all of their time with their mothers, even outside the home, until they start pre-school or school. Children may now be spending more time than before with their mothers as parents have become more worried about the risks of the outside world, and as friends and neighbours have become less willing to look out for other people's children.

Children and families

The Convention on the Rights of the Child gives families the principal responsibility for child care and development. But the sociological literature presents two very different images of the family.

In right-wing political rhetoric and in many forms of social policy, the family appears as the fundamental unit of society. It provides the basic structure within which people develop and function. This family lives in a defined place, is probably headed by a man, and cares for people in a way that divides up key roles between individuals. Under this model, the protection and nurturing of children is a key role for the family. It regards children as innocent and helpless and assumes that adults know best. In this setting, children, in common with other family members, have no discrete rights of their own.

The other side of this coin, presented increasingly from the 1960s onwards, is a research-based analysis of what actually happens in families. Emerging partly from feminism, it stresses the inequality and oppression that exist behind the apparently benign face of the family, and the patriarchal power and actual or potential violence that it involves. In this version, women are given heavy responsibilities, including child-rearing and paid work. The selfless care of dependent children is a key part of their role. When things go wrong with children, women take the blame.

In this context, children are even more severely victimised than women. They have no rights, even to an opinion, and can be subject to violence and abuse. In this way of thinking,

the family is a machine for discipline and surveillance, not a benevolent way of protecting and nurturing the young. While many family members, such as the elderly, are discriminated against in the family, children are in the weakest position of all.

Research in the Caribbean has shown that these issues are very real for women and children there. The ideal Western family has been presented to Caribbean people as the model to aim for, and it has been promoted in legislation and social policy and by churches.

However, the husband-led, co-resident nuclear family is not the dominant social form in Caribbean societies. This has led researchers to apply terms such as loose, promiscuous, denuded, abnormal, subnuclear, incomplete and broken-down to the families they encounter in the region. And these undesirable settings have been found guilty of producing people who turn into teenage criminals, irresponsible fathers and mothers, and other forms of miscreant. Poor families in particular have been the target of social engineering initiatives designed to 'correct' them, for example, by popularising marriage to reduce the number of 'illegitimate' children.

This deficit model of Caribbean life has been rejected by feminist literature, which instead regards these trends as a response to extreme pressures such as poverty and mass migration. These forces have obliged women to become centred within mainly female support networks. This view sees women avoiding marriage to ensure their autonomy.

Variations in family structure

Much of the criticism of supposedly defective family structures is directed at Afro-Caribbean families. Indo-Caribbean ones are regarded as more stable and cohesive, but even they are now seen to be under pressure from outward migration, poverty and violence, which have led to increasing family fragmentation.

Family structures in the three groups we have studied divide along ethnic lines. Carib and Afro-Caribbean families tend to be matrifocal, with mothers as the keystone, supported by daughters and grandmothers. They are certainly the focus of children's lives. By contrast, Indo-Caribbean families are more likely to be patrifocal, and in these, fathers and sons are the key actors. Here the traditional pattern involves several generations forming a household, although this is changing as more young couples want their own homes. This reduces the extensive power once wielded by patriarchal heads of families.

Matrifocal families are based on the idea that the bond between mother and child is of vital importance, while male-female bonds are likely to be less close and enduring. 'Visiting unions' in which both parties remain in their family homes are an accepted form of probably temporary partnership. When such a union produces a child, contact with the father can be only slight.

Despite these insights, Caribbean policy-makers insist on regarding the family as being both the problem and the solution. They seek to strengthen it, while blaming its failings for escalating social problems.

From the point of view of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which places responsibility for children on both parents, this might seem sensible. But in the Caribbean, rates of marriage remain low. In Trinidad and Tobago, only 37 percent of women are married and divorce is common. This is bound to have an effect on children, whether economic, social or psychological. In the region, the term 'outside' children identifies children of previous or concurrent relationships. A 2002 survey showed that 26 percent of children in Trinidad and Tobago live with their mother only despite their father being alive.

In Indo-Caribbean families, divorce is rarer and marriage more usual. But even here there has been change, for example, with the decline of arranged marriage and a trend for people to marry at a later age. This has resulted in a welcome move towards gender equality, although it has also led to a sometimes violent backlash against women who are seen to have too much autonomy or economic power.

Despite their different structures, all the ethnic groups we studied are based upon the extended family. This structure is under pressure because of economic change. In many cases, family members who have migrated away remain important to the family via the remittances they send.

Child shifting

It should not be assumed that the extended family is automatically the most harmonious setting for children. In many that we observed, mothers were alarmed that their own mothers thought it right to hit children, or at the other extreme feared that they were 'spoiling' their children.

One recognised practice within the Caribbean culture of shared child-rearing is 'child shifting,' moving a child from its parents to another part of the family or to live with friends for some extended period and sometimes to a different country. Sometimes it happens because a child needs to be protected or placed where there is more money or opportunity, but the motivation can also be to give a grandparent or an aunt some company.

In recent years, child shifting has been interpreted in a steadily less benign light and is now seen increasingly but simplistically as a form of abandonment and neglect.

Men in a matrifocal society

In this context, the roles of men in matrifocal families have been interpreted as 'marginal'. Even when they live in the household unit, they often have little status and are linked only weakly to the social ties that bind members together. They are economically important and may have ultimate disciplinary powers, but their earning power has been eroded by poverty and unemployment.

In recent years, this image of male redundancy has been challenged. It is becoming apparent that men have a growing role as carers, that they are less 'irresponsible' than had been thought, and that their involvement in household duties and child-rearing is growing. In Trinidad there is informal but generally recognised paternity

leave of a few days' duration for new fathers. However, progress should not be overstated. There is still scope for much more development of fathers' involvement with their children.

In particular, parental separation remains common. It does not always lead to a father having no further role, but it inevitably reduces his importance in the family. Fathers can also be absent because they have migrated or been imprisoned, and they sometimes deny being the father of a child.

Caribbean legal systems also stress the rights of mothers and see men mainly in terms of the financial support they might produce. They have failed to take on board the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with its emphasis on the shared role of both parents. Institutional organisation reflects this mindset, for example by discouraging fathers from attending the births of their children.

Mothers and families under stress
In this context, it is perhaps no surprise that mothers are the most important people in Caribbean children's lives. A mother's load is often eased by help from a father, or from other relatives such as aunts or grandparents. But her ultimate responsibility for her children is unquestioned. The mothers we spoke to took pride in this role but stressed that it is a full-time and demanding one. Many said that motherhood has become more full-time than ever in recent years. Leaving children with friends or neighbours is frowned upon in a way it was not by a previous generation. In addition, children are more questioning and demanding.

Women feel that they are constantly under pressure from their families and from society in general to have well-behaved and well-turned-out children, and that they take the blame for their children's failings. It may seem odd that they bemoan the lack of support they receive while insisting that only they can bring up children properly. But to add to the paradox, mothers often insist that their children be obedient and disciplined in an era when professionals would have them encourage play and spontaneity and allow their children more rights and more agency.

The literature in this field reflects both views of Caribbean motherhood. In one, strong women are at the centre of supportive social groups and cope with adversity and deprivation, helped mainly by others in similar straits. In the other, lone women are poor, vulnerable and exploited; they do low-paid and insecure work and have few welfare entitlements. These two images of the Caribbean woman have little in common beyond the low store they set by Caribbean men.

In practice, life has always been tough in the areas we studied, and women have had to take on many roles, including parenting and paid work. But few we met were matriarchs in the sense of controlling extensive resources of kinship, while most belonged to networks in which men had a significant role.

An especially deprived group consists of young single mothers. They have little family support, even from the fathers of their children. Many have a daily battle even to buy essentials such

as food. While teenage pregnancy has become less common in the Caribbean, it is still a social concern. The children of teenage mothers tend to be deprived, and are at risk of physical and social disadvantage. UNICEF regards teenage pregnancy as a severe child protection issue across the Caribbean, posing a risk to girls comparable to crime and drugs for boys.

Mothers whom we met in our four communities pointed often to the stress and overwork which their lives involve. They often report being exhausted by heavy responsibilities and the lack of any leisure time. As well as working in the labour market, coping with children and taking on heavy domestic duties, some study in the evenings in the hope of getting qualifications.

Many mothers say that this stressful existence does not allow them to spend enough high-quality time with their children. It is generally agreed that children's treatment suffers because of the stress which afflicts their parents. On occasion their stressed condition can lead them to abuse as well as neglect their children. And this condition not only affects the poor. There are cases of rich people who see little of their children as they assign drivers and nannies to cope with child duties just as poorer families use aunts and grandmothers.

There have long been reports of severe domestic violence, often fuelled by alcohol, in the communities we studied, especially in the Carib community of Dominica. Our interviewees thought that the problem was getting worse, partly because of stress on parents, including fathers who felt displaced and unvalued. At the same time, Dominican women have been becoming more assertive and are less likely than before to remain silent in the face of a violent partner.

Children at home and in the community

In both Dominica and Trinidad, it is generally assumed that crisis and change have little effect on children. It is thought that even if parents argue, die, fight, emigrate or simply vanish, their children will cope provided their material needs are met.

In recent times, these assumptions have been challenged more and more, including the belief that children can be 'shifted' without coming to harm.

The four communities we studied offer a wide range of settings for children. Some homes have plentiful toys, games and children's books, while in others they are scarce and tend to be packed away. But in all these environments, children spend most of their time at home until they begin pre-school at age 3.

Parents go to some trouble to keep children physically safe. They are kept away from electricity, sharp knives and heavy objects, and barriers are used to confine them to safe areas. But this protective behaviour contrasts with parents' willingness to expose children to corporal punishment and other forms of abuse and neglect. The television is commonly used as a childminder and parents seem to have little idea of limiting what children watch on it.

The level of community support in these four communities varies widely. Two are newly settled and have comparatively slight community networks, while the other two are longer-established and offer more interaction and assistance when it is needed.

But in all four communities, mothers are inclined to regard the outside world as a threat. They are expected to keep an unblinking eye on their children, who are usually kept indoors and not allowed in the yard, much less the street. Yards tend to be unfenced and once in the street, children might encounter dogs, vehicles, rubbish, stagnant water or other hazards, including insects such as mosquitoes, wasps and bees. None of the areas where we worked has a public park or playground.

But these hazards are less of a concern to parents than those caused by rising social problems. The risk of assault by violent youths, or of exposure to drugs, is a particular concern. Children are regarded as potential kidnap victims, especially in Trinidad. In Dominica, crimes tend to be less severe and less violent. But in both settings, the space for children has shrunk as the perception that they are in danger has grown.

Children, the family and the state

The Convention on the Rights of the Child gives the state the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the rights it mandates are provided. In some areas this is comparatively simple. With enough money, a country can provide enough schools for all its children. But it is harder for the state to protect children at home or in the community from all forms of abuse, as the Convention instructs it to. Some sort of balance of power between parents and the state becomes essential if this objective is to be accomplished.

The Convention contains the concept of parental responsibility. But the whole ethos of the document is that children themselves have rights, including the right to take decisions that they are capable of thinking through. So parental direction has to be appropriate. The state's role is that of supporter and facilitator. It is required to do things that individuals cannot take on, such as suppressing child trafficking, and to step in when parents and other carers are clearly incompetent in a way that risks damaging a child.

Despite the Convention's cautious terminology, these stipulations are a key reason for the United States' refusal to ratify it, on the grounds that it undermines parents' rights.

This highly traditional view of the parent-led family as the organising unit of society, with an authority that should not be undermined except in extreme cases, is also prevalent in Caribbean countries, and indeed in international law. And as families have become more private and smaller, they are if anything less likely to seek out state help. Life takes place behind closed doors more than it once did, and parents, especially single parents, have a strong sense that they may be blamed if their problems are aired in public.

It seems that the Caribbean in general is stony ground for the Convention's high ideals, at least at the community level. Few parents are aware of it and even fewer regard it as important in the day-to-day treatment of their children. Hence recent calls for the Convention's concept of child rights to be demystified for a wider audience.

But at the same time, many supposed experts and the agencies that employ them have only minimal awareness of how homes, families and communities actually come together to raise children. So there is scope for learning on all sides. Much research has focused on harm, especially physical harm, rather than on successful child-rearing. It has generated deficit models that emphasise failure and dysfunction. Too little is known about the routes by which children find their way in life, with adult help and guidance. If more were known about such good practice, it might be possible to promote it. This is especially important in an era when society is changing fast and adults need new knowledge to help develop their parenting practices.

In summary

Caribbean families and communities receive a poor press in the sociological literature, and in professional and public life. But, alongside the discussion of failing families producing failing children, there is a rival view. It suggests that many carers, often women, rear children successfully despite huge obstacles including extreme poverty.

Both of these views contain some truth. But we have found that from children's perspective, these societies can be poor at supplying a supportive context for early life. Family and community support for child-rearing seems to be in decline while the state is reluctant to step in. This can leave children in disadvantaged and sometimes hazardous situations.

Chapter 4: The national setting for childhood

Scholars and practitioners agree that Caribbean countries need extensive national development with a strong social focus. In the past, the emphasis has been on economic growth. This approach has failed to tackle poverty, inequality, social exclusion, injustice, and the violence to which many people are subject in their personal lives. Children, as well as women and the old, are especially vulnerable to these risks.

Enhancing social development and human capital in the region will need more public-sector investment in areas such as education, health and welfare. Special provision for the vulnerable, including young children, is an important part of this package because improving the lives of young children, especially the poorest, is known to reap dividends in later years.

As well as being an obvious priority for Caribbean nations, children have been given a new and enhanced status by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As we have seen (Chapter 2), it gives children their own rights, makes them active agents in their own lives, and improves their status when future development is being planned.

In this chapter, we look at how children's health, well-being, education and protection are promoted by national systems in Trinidad and Tobago and in Dominica, the two countries we studied. Both ratified the Convention in 1991.

We begin by looking at the extent to which children's rights are implemented in the two countries' legal systems. Then we look at how such rights have been implemented and at the cultural barriers to their development. Finally we examine provision for children's identity, survival and health and at education and development in early childhood.

Poverty emerges as a dominant theme affecting the rights of young children and their overall welfare.

Child rights in law and legal practice

Both countries followed up their ratification of the Convention by communicating its importance to the general public and to professionals with responsibility for children. Their legal and cultural systems were receptive to children's rights, as were their populations. A survey in 2000 showed that only 7 percent and 9 percent of the population of Trinidad and Tobago and of Dominica respectively said that they "knew nothing" about children's rights. Most – 82 percent in Trinidad and Tobago and 77 percent in Dominica – felt that children should have rights. There was also a public perception that these rights are not being achieved. Eighty percent of people in Trinidad and Tobago, and over 70 percent in Dominica, said that their countries paid too little attention to the rights of the child and that they knew of

cases where children's rights had been withheld or violated in the previous year.

Despite their peoples' clear wish for progress on children's rights, both countries have preferred rhetoric to action in the years since these surveys were carried out. Children's rights have not become central to the legal system or to the work of governments, NGOs and other bodies. There is a general awareness of children's rights, but attempts to translate the idea into practice may meet public resistance or uncertainty.

In 2001, the Dominican government reported research showing that children were still expected to be seen rather than heard, and that attitudes to practices such as corporal punishment were impeding progress on children's rights. Its research had shown that adults feared that more rights for children meant fewer rights for them, especially in their roles as parents or teachers.

In an attempt to calm such worries, it pointed out that the Convention does not allow children to do what they like, just as the concept of human rights in general does not give people carte blanche to behave as they wish. The Convention does allow parents to decide what is best for their children.

Like other former British colonies, Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica have legal systems which are based on English common law and guarantee basic human rights. But the arrival of the Convention made it clear that their legal systems were defective when it came to children's rights, and both countries reviewed their legislation to see what reforms were necessary.

A number of areas of concern emerged in which children have inadequate or unequal rights, and some have still not been addressed. In Trinidad and Tobago, legal discrimination against children born out of wedlock was significantly reduced in 1983. Most countries in the region have also removed such discriminatory legislation. But Dominican law limits their equality. Little is known of the economic, social and emotional effects of this discrimination, least of all from the point of view of the children themselves.

In addition, both countries have minimum-age laws that date back to the era when childhood was scarcely acknowledged as a life stage. The school leaving age and the minimum age for employment are both 14 in Trinidad and Tobago, while in Dominica the minimum employment age is below the school leaving age. The law should ensure children are educated, and guarantee that they are not harmed by being made to work at a young age. Minimum ages for sexual consent, marriage, parental responsibility and criminal responsibility (the latter at age 7 in Trinidad and Tobago) are also low. Parental consent is required for some early marriage and the young ages in the legislation are in part a concession to Muslim and Hindu tradition.

In general, progress in implementing children's rights has been slow. The focus has been on children at risk and not on more typical children.

Trinidad and Tobago passed legislation in 2000 that amended the law on issues such as child labour, the age of majority, corporal punishment and children's rights. But these acts have yet to come into force. In Dominica, there is legislation which may well add up to a basic framework for children's rights and needs, but it does not exist as a coherent and integrated whole. Neither country has a children's ombudsman.

However, both countries have endorsed the notion of family courts, in which children's rights would inherently be of importance. In Trinidad and Tobago, legislation has been passed and a pilot family court established to deal with child-related, matrimonial and juvenile issues. Based on a successful review, a proposal for additional family courts has been drafted.

But the Dominican government points out that there are too few resources for the good intentions of the law to be carried through. Although the law allows children to be removed from dysfunctional families, there are, however, no children's homes and the fostering system has too few potential foster parents. The result can be unsuitable child-shifting between households, or even homelessness for older children. Likewise, and in both countries, fathers find it easy to avoid payments for child maintenance despite the existence of laws to enforce them.

A further arena in which children do not receive the protection the law mandates is racial discrimination. Carib children suffer from racism. So do Carib women, who lose their position in the Carib community if they marry outside it. This can mean disadvantage for their children, both economically and in cultural deprivation.

Despite this gloomy picture, there is an awareness of these issues in both countries we studied. Steps such as the establishment of family courts, and the commissioning of overall reviews of legislation affecting children, point the way to possible future progress in which the rights and interests of children will be placed at the centre of legal systems.

Children's identity, survival and health

Most births of children are registered in both countries we studied: 95 percent in Trinidad and Tobago and probably a similar figure for Dominica, for which the statistics are not available. Baptism is also nearly universal among Christians. Godparents are regarded as essential in case something happens to a child's birth parents. Surveys also show that church, temple and mosque attendance are regarded as important for children.

Children's survival and health are a success story in both countries. They have implemented preventive primary healthcare strategies with a focus on immunisation, nutrition, the prevention of injuries and health education. More recently, chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, and HIV and AIDS, have also become a central concern.

Both countries regard healthcare in a holistic light and view it as a universal right. Services are free or affordable. Per capita health spending is creditable by Caribbean standards, at US$ 523 per annum in Trinidad and Tobago, and US$ 309 in Dominica, in 2004.

But there are problems with healthcare in both countries. It can be inefficient and delivery can be poor. Where preventative measures have been neglected, there can be demand for expensive curative measures instead. An unregulated private sector has started to grow up and this can mean low-quality services, especially for the poor.

It is unlikely that these populations can become much healthier while they remain poor. Rural and poor people have persistent bad health and are least likely to receive primary care.

Of special concern are the Carib people of Dominica. Their numbers have dwindled to about 1,700 and intermarriage and migration threaten their future as a separate group. While they tend to live in the Carib Territory, they do not have a distinct culture or language apart from some traditional handicrafts. Their health, education and welfare are well below the national average. Attempts to revive the Carib language and culture have been slow to get going. This community is subject to many health concerns including violence, alleged incest, sexually transmitted disease, and the health effects of poor water supplies and dangerous waste disposal practices.

Motherhood and childbirth

The basic indicators of child survival show that infant and child mortality have been reduced. Maternal deaths during childbirth are also rare. Ante-natal care is generally available, although it may not reach specific individuals such as teenagers who are hiding their pregnancies. Almost all babies are born in hospital and their births are attended by qualified professionals. There continue to be some problems with mothers and babies who are harmed by traditional practices, such as the drinking of bush tea to hasten birth.

As we saw in Chapter 3, young children spend most of their time indoors and at home, and the hazards they face are those of home life. Accident and injuries at home – for example from drinking kerosene stored in soft drink bottles – are the most common danger for the very young, along with infectious disease. Other concerns are a small but growing number of infanticides. The highly disadvantaged Carib community has its own more severe problems, such as respiratory disease caused by sleeping on old rags, and fungus infections exacerbated by overcrowding.

Some aspects of early child care are highly developed in both countries. This is true of immunisation against polio, diphtheria, TB and measles, which has become effectively universal. Parents generally know that immunisation is important even when they do not know the

details, although Rastafarian parents may still refuse to have their children immunised.

Another generally positive story is about children's birth weight and subsequent weight increase. The percentage of children with a low birth weight is small. There have been successful campaigns to promote breast-feeding, and breast-fed children are starting to be regarded as healthier and more successful. Among poorer communities, too, breast-feeding is appreciated because it saves money. But even here there are some problems. Breast-feeding does not last as long as it might, and often ceases at less than six months when the mother resumes paid work. This means that children are introduced to solid food at an unsuitably young age.

Neither country has a serious problem with malnourished children. It was not reported as a cause of death in any child in Dominica between 1995 and 2000. This marks a major improvement over previous decades.

Despite this progress, there are specific and usually localised nutritional problems in both countries. Iron deficiency is common and a 2002 report on several Caribbean countries, including Dominica, reported anaemia in 43 percent of 1-to-4-year-olds. There are also anecdotal reports that malnutrition in Dominica has increased as the economy has slowed. More deprived areas in both countries have more child hunger than richer parts, with meals becoming scarcer and more irregular.

Here, as elsewhere, obesity and overweight have emerged as substantial public health problems. Even young children are affected and their intake of processed imported foods, often rich in sugar and fat, has grown. Young children may also be fed snack foods and other convenience foods rather than something fresher and more nutritious. In Dominica, three percent of children under 5 were identified as obese in 1985, but 9.4 percent in 2002.

Teenage parents

In both countries there have been campaigns to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy, which is seen as leading to a cycle of deprivation for mother and child. These include family planning campaigns and schemes to get school-age mothers back into education. Many of these schemes are regarded as problematic by their intended clients. They may find it awkward to go back to school after giving birth, and they may fear breaches of confidence if they seek help with contraception from a village nurse who knows their family well.

The reasons for teenage pregnancy are many. They include poor knowledge and defective sex education, fragmented families, and high levels of drug and alcohol use. Surveys show most children becoming sexually active before the age of 13, with low levels of condom use and large numbers of partners.

In addition, many young girls are the victims of severely exploitative sexual practices, including prostitution.

Abortion is illegal and punishable with imprisonment in both countries. But it seems that about 19,000 abortions are carried out each year in Trinidad and Tobago, usually under unsafe conditions. About a fifth of the women who have these abortions are later admitted to hospital.

This number of abortions is so large that it is a major factor in cutting teenage births. But there is a substantial public health cost, including the adverse effects of taking the 'abortion pill,' which is readily available. The influence of the Catholic Church means that abortion will probably remain illegal.

The HIV and AIDS epidemics are apparent in both countries, and especially in Trinidad and Tobago. Here HIV was first identified in 1983 with 4,433 cases by 2003. By 2003 151 cases had been identified in Dominica. The virus is usually transmitted heterosexually and has become increasingly common amongst teenage girls. In Trinidad and Tobago it is five times as common amongst 15–19-year-old girls as it is amongst boys of the same age.

HIV and AIDS are an attack on children's rights in a number of ways. As well as reducing their health, children with HIV may become orphans, especially if they have caught the disease by maternal transmission. The availability of anti-retroviral drugs is now extending HIV victims' lives and making such bereavement less likely.

There are monitoring, counselling and support services for expectant mothers to detect HIV and

help them deal with it. These are more advanced in Trinidad and Tobago than in Dominica. But services for people living with HIV and AIDS are limited in both countries.

Healthy environment

Most people in both countries own their own homes and have proper water and power supplies as well as sanitation. This even applies to the former squatter town of Tarish Pit. But there are environmental issues such as waste dumping, unsafe food handling and other dangerous practices. These can lead to infections, including dengue fever and diarrhoea.

Our research shows a severe divide between patients and medical professionals. Patients regard the professionals as arrogant, while doctors and other professionals think their patients are dependent and child-like, wanting all their problems solved as if by magic.

However, the health status of people in both these countries belies their poor development and would not be inappropriate for a richer nation.

Education and development

We now appreciate the vital importance of the early years of life to a child's physical, cognitive and emotional development. As a result, more early and pre-school provision is available for children. Young children are taught to think and make judgements about the world more than in the past, and to participate more actively in society. This approach allows children to be

more resilient and to make the most of their right to make autonomous decisions.

Of course, children develop in many settings including the home and the community. Only in recent years has the process become more professionalised as the benefits of early years provision have become more widely appreciated.

In the Caribbean, the move towards more early years provision has not been a government priority. The stress has been on primary and secondary schools. These are a success story. Over 90 percent of children are enrolled in primary schools while in Dominica, 96 percent are enrolled in secondary schools, with a lower figure of 83 percent for Trinidad and Tobago.

These figures all mark big improvements in recent years. But there are problems, especially with attendance and with teenage males dropping out of school.

Pre-school provision is a heavy economic burden for many parents. In Dominica, fees must be paid. In Trinidad and Tobago, the provision is free but uniforms, lunches and transport need to be funded. It is run by NGOs, churches and other bodies and as we shall see, standards vary. There has been a Caribbean-level plan to set standards and ensure equitable pre-school provision for children from poor families, which has yet to achieve full effect.

In both Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago, pre-school provision has mostly been directed at 3-to-5-year-olds, and there is little provision

for anyone below three. But there is 70 percent enrolment in pre-school for 3–5s in Trinidad and Tobago, and over 1,000 pre-school establishments. Only 150 are run by the state. There is more of a problem with pre-school provision in Dominica, where enrolment was at 82 percent in 1997/98, but had fallen to less than 55 percent in 2006, with a fall in the number of places offering it.

Parents' main problem with pre-school provision is paying for it. Other concerns such as availability, location and parental awareness are less vital and it seems that the need to save money is the main reason for children not attending. In Trinidad and Tobago, only 21 percent of children from poor families attend pre-school compared to 51 percent of those from wealthy families. This disparity continues into school itself.

Both countries have formed organisations to promote and improve early years provision, although at the time of writing, Dominica's had no staff or other resources. The hope is that in time, they will raise standards for staff, facilities, buildings, resources, learning and discipline, including approaches for children with special needs.

At present, standards in pre-school institutions vary widely. In urban areas with prosperous families, standards tend to be visibly higher, as are the fees. At the other extreme are rural or village centres run by neighbours in a spare room. A survey in Dominica pointed to problems with lighting, soundproofing, safety precautions, cleanliness and health, and

overcrowding, and similar quality issues emerged in a study of centres in Trinidad and Tobago.

These inequalities were also apparent from our research. Children of wealthier families tend to be driven to expensive pre-school centres while poorer families are dependent on state-subsidised provision, or in Dominica on provision by an American charity, the Christian Children's Fund.

Pre-school in practice

There has been extensive work on developing a pre-school curriculum. In Trinidad and Tobago, one known as SPICES stresses all-round child development, including social, physical, emotional, creative and spiritual capacities. It opposes too much emphasis on numeracy and literacy at an early age.

But there is little state monitoring of what happens at the country's pre-school centres. The stress tends to be on custodial care or on subjects that might give a child a head start in mainstream schooling. Research in both countries has shown that softer skills such as communication, creativity and language are rarely stressed in pre-school provision.

All pre-school centres, including the expensive ones, place great emphasis on the academic development of their pupils, with large groups and rote learning, along with organised sport and other activities. Children are rarely allowed to play alone or with a friend and there is usually a strict timetable for the day.

A further way in which such centres may not be fulfilling the letter or the spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is discipline. Teachers tend to have complete power over the children. This has not prevented many having severe discipline problems, which have led to the use of corporal punishment. Trinidad and Tobago has passed laws against corporal punishment in schools and non-violent alternatives such as time-outs are now more common.

One reason for this poor practice might be parental indifference. The evidence is that parents value pre-school more as a form of childminding than for its developmental benefits.

Parents who regard pre-school mainly as childcare may well choose not to send their children if they are unemployed themselves, as they have the time to look after their children and are keen to save money. Working mothers also economise by sending young children to relatives or neighbours. This means that their children miss out on the undoubted educational and social benefits of pre-school.

The present trend, despite falling participation in Dominica, is for parents to have more appreciation of the benefits of pre-school than in the past. Many make sizeable sacrifices to ensure that their children can attend. Their main interest, though, is in its potential as an academic hothouse, not its role in developing the full person. Providers do little to involve parents or to inform them about what is involved.

We now regard pre-school provision as vital, and think of low participation and low standards almost as child neglect. This means that governments, including those in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, will come under growing pressure to raise standards and ensure more provision. The alternative is continuing inequality as the children of poor parents receive the least adequate provision. We also appreciate increasingly that the social and personal aspects of pre-school provision are at least as important as the educational ones. Formal learning may even be the least important part of pre-school attendance. There is vigorous debate on this. But the evidence is clear from the countries that we studied that early educational provision for children reflects social inequality rather than remedying it.

In summary

The Caribbean shows up well on many indicators of development by comparison with other areas of the developing world. Caribbean children often have a high quality of childhood and legal and institutional frameworks support their development. These systems are responsive to emerging threats such as HIV and AIDS and obesity. In Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica, they have survived economic difficulties which have affected government finances.

But problems remain. National plans continue to stress economic rather than social development. Social issues tend to emerge as priorities and then disappear without being dealt with. An example is the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It led to extensive discussion involving governments and other agencies. But it has not produced single agencies or policies directed towards children and their rights. Instead, new bodies and regulations have been added, but there are still gaps in provision, for example in resources for young children.

The alternative is a rethink of what childhood is and how society should support it. This has yet to happen, least of all in the form of a public debate. Children's rights remain poorly developed, and children are now slipping down the agenda in both countries.

In addition, national indicators inherently disguise inequality within countries. The societies of Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago both reflect social inequalities. People with money can buy better resources for their children and often do, especially in early years education. At the other end of the scale, poor parents, including single and teenage mothers and members of the Carib community, have no such options. Their children can expect poorer pre-school provision or none at all. Education, early care and development are vital to their prospects of breaking out of a damaging cycle of poverty.

Chapter 5: Surviving poverty

Poverty is the biggest hazard to child development. It leaves children vulnerable to all forms of abuse from homelessness to child labour, teenage pregnancy or even death – and these hazards are by no means confined to the developing world.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that children need adequate resources. Articles 26 and 27 declare that they have the right to social security and an adequate standard of living, and make parents, guardians and the state responsible for providing them.

In the Caribbean region, the responsibility for children falls mainly on their mothers. With the help of families and others, they adopt a range of survival strategies, but these do not always work. Children are most at risk when family and community support mechanisms and social services fail. Poor children are in poor families, so poverty is profoundly intergenerational.

This examination of poverty and its effects on children begins with a critical examination of the ways in which poverty is measured. We suggest better measures that take account of the perceptions of both children and adults. We then look at poverty and vulnerability in Dominica and in Trinidad and Tobago, from physical, economic and social angles. Then we examine poverty alleviation initiatives implemented by the state, NGOs and other actors, and the strategies which mothers and other family members have adopted to cope with the erosion of social capital.

Despite these efforts, not all children receive adequate support. We end this chapter by looking at these at-risk individuals. Here again, poverty is a major risk factor for children. It puts them in danger and makes it harder for measures designed to help them to succeed. This affects their quality of life and the human rights which the Convention articulates.

Perceiving and measuring poverty

In recent years our statistical knowledge of the standard of living of households and individuals has grown dramatically. Detailed knowledge at a granular level has been added to the national-level information which had previously been available and which inevitably disguises inequality within nations.

In the Caribbean, we know more about the incomes and living conditions of the poor and vulnerable via a number of surveys which have looked at finance as well as health, survival, education and other factors.

But these surveys have generated little specific data on children, although the Convention mandates national reports on their progress. It tends to be assumed that children are household members with full access to the resources of the household. Of course there are many cases

where adults make sacrifices for children; but especially in poorer households, we cannot assume that they will. For example, boys and older children may well be favoured over girls, or children with disabilities may be regarded as less of a priority.

More data is needed on the quality of children's lives, and not just in economic terms. Environmental conditions and access to social services are areas in which we need to know more. The Convention and subsequent documents point to children's rights to affection, care, to having their basic needs met, to education, to protection from economic, social and natural hazards, to freedom from violence and abuse, and to participation in a supportive environment that encourages personal development. This means that children have rights in the home, the community, and in formal settings such as school.

This view of children's rights stresses qualitative measures which need to be interpreted differently in different cultures. As we have seen, some cultures stress children's academic development, whilst others emphasise their physical capacities and are happy for academic skills to be addressed once a child gets to school. In a poor household, basic needs such as protection, food and clothing may use up all the available resources. Here too, parents may lack the leisure to ensure that their children can make their own choices about life – one of the cornerstones of the Convention.

Young children are among the victims of economic shocks and crises, as events in several

Caribbean countries have shown. For example, Trinidad and Tobago was badly affected in the 1990s by the end of an oil price boom. A 1995 survey found 21 percent of the population were below the poverty line and 11 percent 'extremely poor,' which was defined as being unable to meet basic needs. Something similar happened in Dominica because of problems with the banana industry, where 29 percent of households and 39 percent of the population were found to be poor in a 2003 survey. There, 11 percent of households and 15 percent of the population were 'indigent,' unable to meet basic needs.

Poverty is worst for children, women and the old. Households headed by women are the likeliest to be poor, especially if they include children. Surveys have shown that women head 37 percent of households in Dominica and 31 percent in Trinidad and Tobago. In Trinidad and Tobago, female-headed households had an average income of US$ 1,029 per month in 2000 compared to an average of US$ 1,238 for male-headed households. But households headed by women and including children had an average income of only US$ 779. In Dominica, 70 percent of poor households have children, but only 44 percent of households not regarded as poor have children.

In both of the countries we studied, poverty is at its most extreme in rural areas. In Dominica, three quarters of poor households are rural. Dominica's poorest people are in the small indigenous Carib community. The Caribs have rights to communal land and are therefore able to fall back on subsistence food production; but

they are also the most prone to unemployment and low pay. Their access to safe water, indoor kitchens, consumer durable goods and other assets is low, reflecting their poverty.

Despite the statistics, many Caribbean people are reluctant to agree that they are in the shaming condition of 'poverty,' which they associate with TV images of starving people in Africa. A study in Dominica showed that most people regard themselves as being in good health with children who are being educated, and with proper resources such as homes that they own and safe water supplies. Asked about poverty, they defined it partly in material terms ("not knowing where the meals are coming from") and partly in terms of its effects on people ("the inability to energise yourself"). By contrast, most people think that they are able to plan their own futures actively.

The natural and human background

Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica are both classed as small-island developing states. Trinidad and Tobago totals 5,128 square kilometres and is home to 1.4 million people, while Dominica is far smaller at about 750 square kilometres in size and with a population of about 70,000. Dominica is in the path of Caribbean hurricanes and has severe weather which destroys roads, crops, bridges and homes. This damage has been costly to repair. One of the settlements where we worked, Tarish Pit, was set up as a squatter settlement in 1979 after Hurricane David had destroyed homes and crops. Hurricane David also caused

20,000 people to leave the island, a quarter of its population.

Trinidad and Tobago lies south of the hurricane track. But it still has earthquakes (some up to magnitude 8.0), landslides, floods and other natural hazards.

Both countries are parliamentary democracies with multi-party elections scheduled every five years. They have extensive decentralisation with the Caribs of Dominica, in particular, having a large degree of autonomy. Another of our study areas, Atkinson, lies partly within the Carib Territory.

The Caribs have in the past had a warlike reputation and the Spanish, the first European colonists, tended to avoid them. They were eventually driven from their land by European-led 'Indian hunting' raids. Their numbers were much reduced, while their lands became slave plantations for sugar and coffee. Runaway slaves, the Maroons, became a further warlike minority.

Trinidad was settled by French and Spanish immigrants but never became a complete slave economy like other Caribbean islands. Tobago came under British rule at the end of the 18th Century, at the same time as Trinidad. Trinidad's agricultural workforce was made up mainly of indentured labourers from India, over 140,000 of whom came between 1845 and 1917 on five-year or longer contracts under which they lived in exceptionally deprived conditions.

More recently, both countries have been comparatively stable despite a violent attempted

coup in Trinidad and Tobago in 1990. There were also plans for a Dominican coup in the 1980s, but in general, Dominica is one of the region's more stable countries.

Economically, these nations are part of the developing world but they are not poor, for example, in comparison with many African nations. They have traditionally depended upon agriculture, which is now in decline as a percentage of national output. Trinidad and Tobago has been heavily dependent upon oil and gas exports, whose price movements have had severe economic effects including a significant slump in the 1980 and 1990s when incomes fell and unemployment rose. But basic measures of social welfare suggest that health, education and other services continued to be delivered. In recent years, oil prices soaring to beyond US$ 100 a barrel have made Trinidad and Tobago the most prosperous country in the Caribbean.

Dominica remains mainly an agricultural economy, with bananas as its main product. The end of European preference for its bananas precipitated an economic crisis that was exacerbated by storm and hurricane damage. Attempts to diversify Dominican agricultural production have not filled the gap and other ideas such as ecotourism are being tried. The result has been a reduction in the incomes of the most vulnerable, including women, children and the old. It is regarded as one of the most vulnerable states in the world, partly because it is too poor to withstand the effects of severe storms and other natural disasters.

In the modern era, crime and violence have emerged as concerns, especially in Trinidad and Tobago, as have the low detection rates even for serious offences such as murder. Illegal drug use has grown and harder drugs such as crack cocaine have partly replaced marijuana.

In Trinidad and Tobago, there is also concern that people regard criminal behaviour, such as unlicensed trading or squatting, as economically justifiable. It is condoned by the authorities and some criminals are lionised rather than being condemned.

By contrast, Dominica is a comparatively peaceful and low-crime society, although young men in supposed gangs are regarded as a cause for concern.

Women and unemployment

Unemployment is a key contributor to poverty in both countries. Because women are important to child support, unemployment among them is a particular concern for the purposes of this study. In Dominica in 2002, unemployment was 18 percent in non-poor households and 40 percent in poor households. Rising oil prices had cut unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago to 12.7 percent in 2004. But in Dominica the banana crisis had caused unemployment to rise from 10 to 25 percent between 1991 and 2002. There is also underemployment, which means that even some of the people who are working are living in poverty.

Both countries have populations with low levels of skill and education. This means that many of their citizens are capable only of low-level, low-pay work. The unemployed are reduced to carrying out handicrafts, subsistence agriculture or fishing, or are dependent on remittances from relatives overseas or rely on state welfare. These do not add up to a comfortable income.

Although Caribbean nations have signed international agreements guaranteeing women equality in the workplace, Caribbean women there are still less well-paid than men and are more likely to be unemployed. They are often confined to traditional 'women's work.' Child-friendly employers are a rarity in the region, while parental leave and on-site childcare are underdeveloped.

Some women with small children, and who have male economic support, actively prefer to be home-makers. However, the shortage of secure jobs for women has led many less well-off women to become small traders who travel around the islands selling food, flowers and other goods, or they have become 'suitcase ladies' who go abroad to buy goods which they sell from small shops and stalls. This is arduous and insecure work, and the women who do it often have to leave small children behind for weeks at a time. This explains the often a direct connection between poverty, deprivation and the neglect of children.

Migration, age and fertility

Caribbean populations have long been shaped by both inwards and outwards migration. The majority of people in the two countries we studied are descended from African slaves or Indian indentured labourers. There are also Chinese and Middle Eastern communities, the descendants of the European colonisers (now mixed with the rest of the population), and the much-reduced indigenous populations. Trinidad and Tobago's population is mainly Christian (60 percent, mainly Catholic) with 24 percent Hindu and 6 percent Muslim, while 70 percent of Dominicans are Catholic. Smaller numbers of Christians are Rastafarians, or belong to Pentecostal or Evangelical churches.

Falling fertility and persistent migration, along with longer lives, mean that both countries have ageing populations and fewer children. In this respect their national statistics almost mirror those for the United States and European countries. The under-5s make up about 10 percent of the population in each. Social service provision is challenged by these growing numbers of older people, as are families, which may be caring for an older person while still having children to care for.

Better contraception and the emigration of young women are factors in the falling number of children. In the last 30 years, live births per woman in Trinidad and Tobago have fallen from 3.5 to 1.6, and to 1.9 in Dominica. While unplanned pregnancies still happen, better education, better contraception and more employment opportunities have all encouraged women to have fewer children. Many people regard two as the ideal number of children.

Caribbean countries became major exporters of people after the Second World War. Emigration from Trinidad and Tobago is now low, and the population grew by 200,000 during the 20th century. But emigration continues from Dominica because of the agricultural crisis mentioned above. While the island now has a population of only about 70,000, over 150,000 Dominicans have left since the Second World War. Most of those who leave are young people, and women are more likely to leave than men, leaving men in the majority in the 25–39 age group.

Emigration has helped control population growth, while the remittances sent home by emigrants are important, accounting for 12 percent of Dominican GDP in 2004. Remittances have been a vital lifeline for the country and for individuals, but the sums are rarely enough to keep people far above the poverty line. In addition, it is inevitably the most valuable participants in the economy who have the biggest incentive to leave, including nurses, teachers and IT experts. Trinidad and Tobago has been forced to import nurses to compensate for those emigrating.

Little is known about the effects of emigration on children but there are many individual accounts of their puzzlement and distress when, for example, their mother or father has left to work abroad

Poverty alleviation

Both countries have a range of policies to alleviate poverty. They aim both to blunt its effect and to reduce its incidence by promoting social development. Local and international NGOs have been important partners in this work. There is local provision for measuring poverty and its effects, although the outputs are not above criticism.

Social security, public assistance and old age pensions exist in both countries. But their overall policy settings and their practical administration have both been criticised. Payments can be irregular and criteria unclear. In Dominica, public assistance is still called 'Pauper's Allowance.' It is paid to indigent families and individuals and there can be special payments for children. But the payments are small and the state's finances are so weak that even maintaining them at their existing level is a struggle for the government. There are also schemes to support school meals, skills training and educational essentials, but they often fail to benefit the very poor. Many people who are poor by any standard receive nothing.

Both countries have legal procedures to allow parents, in practice usually mothers, to pursue maintenance payments in respect of children of up to 15 years old in Dominica and 18 in Trinidad and Tobago. But there are many barriers to success. It may be hard to locate the father, he may be living abroad, and he may not have much money. Even a successful action often leads to a small payment that may be less than could have been agreed voluntarily. In any case, court actions are too lengthy and awkward for many women.

Politicians, civil servants and volunteers

Neither country has a ministry or department for children. So initiatives meant to benefit them are scattered across a range of agencies. But Trinidad and Tobago has had a National Family Services Division since 1991, forming part of the Prime Minister's office. It is intended to promote healthy family functioning but has few resources for the burgeoning demands on it. It adopts a casework approach which limits how broadly it can be effective.

In both countries there have been calls to set up a coherent ministry or agency to look after children and their interests as a whole.

In addition, measures designed to benefit children are seen to be bureaucratic and top-down, and tend to be too focussed on towns. The communities we studied had little awareness of central government initiatives for children.

In practice NGOs provide many services to the poor and to children, especially in Dominica because of its severely limited public finances. There are an estimated 454 active NGOs in Trinidad and Tobago, many working in social development and to relieve poverty. Of interest for our purposes is Service Volunteered for All (SERVOL). Set up in 1970, it has established early childhood education centres across the country and in 1992 began its Parent Outreach Programme to educate and support parents.

In Dominica the Christian Children's Fund, an American charity, has provided parenting programmes, child abuse interventions, help with pre-school fees and teacher training for pre-school workers, especially for the Carib community.

These NGOs often have a very specific focus and many have detailed knowledge of the problem they are dealing with and the communities with which they are involved. But many are small and depend upon voluntary labour, and some lack management skills. They do effective work but cannot solve national problems or make up for a lack of resources in the nation as a whole.

Survival strategies

Inadequate provision by the public sector and NGOs mean that the poor have to develop their own survival strategies. Dominicans often migrate to seek better economic pastures, either to the nearby French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe or farther afield. Others move to the capital, Roseau, or commute there to work.

Those who do have work might be expected to get several jobs in the hope that the combined wages will add up to a worthwhile income. But this strategy is not easy to achieve because of the overall lack of employment opportunities. Much employment is seasonal. People move between building work, tourism, farming, fishing and other activities, some of which is very poorly paid, through the year. It is mainly men who work in this way and there is little flexible, properly paid employment for people with children to look after.

People in both countries have highly developed strategies for managing what little money they

have. In Dominica, credit unions are a popular means of savings and there are also 'rotating' credit clubs into which people pay small sums, receiving a lump sum when their turn comes round.

Of more concern are methods which people are adopting to make their money go further. Some of these harm children directly, such as removing them from school or pre-school. Bought food can also be replaced by local carbohydrate-rich subsistence crops. Poor people often fail to pay their bills so their water, electricity and telephones can be cut off, leaving them dependent on public provision such as water standpipes, public toilets and washing facilities, and causing them to cook on hazardous fires.

Social capital in the form of contacts and networks is a vital survival tool. People build relationships to help provide their basic needs and to help find work. Mainly the links run within families, whether they live in one household or extend nationally or internationally. Adults are supposed to provide financial and material support for older and younger family members. Also, grandmothers have an especially vital role in childcare. Some Dominican children attend school in the towns but spend holidays and weekends at home in a rural areas where they are looked after by different family members at different times.

The most important of these links are within families. There is a general feeling that people

are less willing than in the past to help unrelated neighbours. People regard urban areas as threatening rather than supportive. In particular Tarish Pit is seen by its inhabitants as a poor place where people struggle to fend for themselves, let alone anyone else, and where people are not safe. They want to leave and many move abroad.

Here and elsewhere in the region, gangs of young males are regarded as a particular concern. The members find petty crime a more lucrative and available option than legal work.

Policies intended to reduce poverty are taking increasing account of the idea of social capital as an asset. In the past, the culture of poor communities has been thought of as a problem, encouraging fatalism and helplessness. This meant that poverty reduction involved breaking through prevailing cultures. But now, institutional frameworks, not cultural settings, are regarded as most critical for change in poverty alleviation and economic development.

But in the communities we studied, social capital is used for survival rather than development. An obvious example is the use of 'othermothers' such as aunts, sisters and grandmothers to help with childcare. Men are also doing more of this work. But as we have seen, there is a belief that supportive networks beyond the family are becoming sparser and there is less community provision of resources. State resources should be used to enhance social capital to help alleviate and reduce poverty and its effects.

Children in poverty

Children are among the victims of this decline in social capital. Some are left with elderly and infirm grandparents when their parents migrate. Other families have several children and only a mother to support them on low wages. Even worse off are those in children's homes or on the street. We know little about the lives of the poorest children: but their numbers are likely to be growing and they may be at increasing risk as family stresses grow.

In Dominica, reported cases of child abuse rose from five in 1985 to 303 in 1998, perhaps because of increased awareness as well as increased incidence. Many such reports refer to sexual abuse. There are fewer reports of violence against children, more common than reported, but is also less widely condemned.

The evidence suggests that a similar increase may be occurring in Trinidad and Tobago. Here teachers as well as parents are violent to children, and any excuses from slowness to academic failure can lead to a beating.

Convictions for child abuse are rare, even for serious offences such as incest, and the matter is sometimes settled by an out of court cash payment. Cases that come to court are a heavy emotional burden for the child.

Children with disabilities are at even greater risk of disadvantage. Welcome reductions in infant mortality have increased their numbers. In Dominica, a 1989 survey showed that 10 percent of the population was disabled, and 13 percent of those up to age 14. A 1999 survey in Dominica showed that 28 percent of a sample of children with disabilities were not in education. The more severely disabled a child is, the more likely he or she is to be hidden away and to receive no help. For example, a child who is not toilet-trained will not be able to attend pre-school.

Little is known about children under 5 with disabilities. In Trinidad and Tobago, the mean age for referring someone with a disability for professional help is 7.6 years. Families often fail to report disability for reasons that have not been fully identified. In any case, facilities for those with disabilities, children as well as adults, are inadequate in quality and quantity.

Children without parents

Few Caribbean children are completely without a family. In Trinidad and Tobago, 5.7 percent of children live with neither parent, but this does not mean that they are without families. However, we are now learning more clearly that children who are shifted between carers, families and others are prone to feelings of neglect and abandonment. Some are referred to as 'barrel children,' who receive goods from abroad but lack parental care.

Trinidad and Tobago has several children's homes. Children tend to be there because their parents have problems with alcohol and other drugs, or are mentally unstable.

Dominica has one small home offering temporary accommodation to children, run by a British charity. But state financial constraints and

arguments against institutionalising children have meant that there is no long-stay children's home on the island. There is a national fostering and adoption system, but it is hamstrung by a lack of would-be foster and adoptive parents. It is rare for fostering to lead to full adoption, or for parents to reclaim fostered children. Such children can spend their childhood in an uncertain limbo.

Street children

The phenomenon of children living on the street, alone or with homeless parents, emerged in Trinidad and Tobago in the late 1980s. Their lives are obviously very hard and they are perhaps more at risk than any other group we mention here. Little is known about them and little has been done to help them.

Child labour

A 1999 survey found that between 10 and 25 percent of children over 12 are at work in the Caribbean region. They are usually in family enterprises, small farms and other informal settings, and not in factories or big businesses. Many children take on tasks such as running errands or looking after their younger siblings from a very early age. Indo-Trinidadian families often keep girls at home for domestic work. Part of this is probably acceptable socialisation for adult life, while some is exploitative. One study found that children under 14 were working as street vendors and that their income was an essential part of the family's income, suggesting that in this case a line into unacceptable exploitation had been crossed. The children

themselves said that they would rather be at school and were ashamed to be working on the street. The Dominican government denies that there is a problem with child labour, but the visible and anecdotal evidence does not support this optimism.

In summary

Children in poverty are almost always trapped in a cycle of deprivation in which their own early life and childhood are compromised and they are potential victims of abuse. They in turn may become criminals, have poor working lives, or become parents of deprived children.

In these two countries, children are rarely victims of utter destitution. They more commonly suffer from poverty caused by unemployment and underemployment. Women and the old, too, are frequent victims of privation and live lives in which basic essentials can only be provided with difficulty.

Poverty alleviation programmes in both countries have been less than successful, because they are underfunded and their users face stigma. More targeted interventions, such as making sure single mothers have enough money for food and can get child care to help them manage paid work, might be more successful, as might schemes to keep teenage mothers in education. These might supplement family and community networks that are under pressure, and the overseas remittances that are rarely adequate.

Chapter 6: Motherhood, poverty and children's rights

The recent re-imaging of children and childhood amounts to a global revolution. In the past, children were often invisible, or were regarded as empty vessels to be filled. Now they are seen as people with rights, including the right to take appropriate decisions about themselves. There is a global movement to support children, and there are national policies to help their development within their own communities and families.

Academic discourse has adapted to this change. As well as children's rights, it now pays more attention to early growth and development, and to children in a wide range of environments and contexts. More research is being carried out in a range of cultures into the daily lives of children and the adults around them.

Our research in four communities in Trinidad and Tobago and Dominica showed that ideas of children's rights, and of early childhood development, can be poorly compatible with long-established cultural norms. In these communities, an 'ideal child' is helpful, reliable, sociable, obedient, and as independent as possible in terms of everyday activities such as walking, talking, feeding and dressing. Being tidy and playing quietly alone are praised, as are being polite and taking on tasks and errands.

These ideals can only be achieved by close parental control. While very small children are indulged, anyone beyond the age of 2 is subject to discipline intended to make sure that they are quiet, productive and well-mannered. Physical punishment may be on the decline, but it is still an important part of the picture. Any parent who indulges children is viewed as risking 'spoiling' them and exposing hazards, including the risk that they will grow into bad habits in later life.

This model for developing children seems likely to limit their free development and is certain to contravene their human rights, especially their right to express themselves and take their own decisions.

These four communities are tough places to live and families there struggle to raise children. Most of the responsibility for children falls upon women, despite the importance of other family members and the growing role of men in childcare. Mothers think that they have a more demanding role than in previous generations.

Migration is often identified as part of the problem, by removing important family members. Community social capital is thought to be in decline, so that the village community does not raise the child as people believe it used to. At the same time, people think that these communities are becoming more dangerous, so mothers think that children need to be kept at home. Mothers regard motherhood as their main aim in life. They 'sacrifice' themselves to the role and think that only they are capable of raising children. Far from being a supportive structure for all its members, the family ends up

by exploiting some more severely than others, especially women. Few are at the centre of the nurturing, supportive network of Caribbean legend.

In both countries, the family is regarded as an autonomous unit and the state is reluctant to intervene in it. Only extreme neglect or abuse tend to be reported to the authorities, while less severe cases are viewed as family business.

Despite these issues, successive governments of Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago have improved provision for children and their protection. The basic indicators for their survival, health and development have all risen. Families and children in both countries have good access to healthcare, although there is an emerging two-tier system in which those who can afford private care are able to opt out of the lower-quality public provision.

Both countries have good and expanding primary and secondary schools, but provision for the under-5s is less satisfactory. Young children are regarded as the family's responsibility and much pre-school provision is in private hands and of variable quality. Again, good provision tends to be in towns and tends to cost more. The children who are at most need of high-quality input at an early age are least likely to get it.

Parents have a strong idea of what they want from pre-school provision. They are keen for it to expand children's reading, writing and other academic achievements, but do not tend to

view it as a contributor to their overall human development.

In the communities we studied, parents have little awareness that their children's all-round development is important, or that it might be enhanced by time and energy put into children at home. A child's early experience of life can perpetuate the disadvantages they are born in to.

In this context, the Convention on the Rights of the Child helps draw attention to the frequent neglect of children's all round development and acts as an incentive for further action. A major problem is that neither of the countries we studied, nor others in the Caribbean region, have child-focussed legal and social systems. Few countries in the region have a specific body of law or a government department that attend just to children's issues.

These legal and political concerns are exacerbated by economic ones. There is general agreement that poverty is a key factor in limiting children's survival, development and human rights. Poverty reduction strategies must be child-focused. Our research showed that child deprivation begins at an early age and it is very hard for a new generation to break out of it. Interventions by the state and by NGOs tend to skim the surface of the problem rather than solving it.

In small island states, people are vulnerable to economic and environmental crises and the state has fewer resources to help than would be available in a larger country.

Both of the countries we worked in are prone to shocks from the world economy, especially from oil prices in Trinidad and Tobago and from changes in the banana market for Dominica. The falls in income which can result affect children disproportionately. As well as attacking their material welfare, lower incomes for families make it more likely for children to be taken out of school. National economic uncertainty also encourages people to emigrate, especially younger people including parents, so that family care is reduced. Poverty may force families into homelessness, perhaps as squatters, especially if support networks are eroded. Especially at risk are the children of single mothers where the mothers began child-rearing at an early age.

Despite these pessimistic trends, children in the Caribbean are loved and valued. They are the centre of family life, a social and psychic asset for their parents and potential economic providers.

However, not all children are equally valued. Those who are regarded as slow learners, 'troublesome' or who have a disability, are regarded with less enthusiasm than others. They can be neglected, hidden away or even abused.

Increasing awareness in the Caribbean of the importance of early childhood means more emphasis on the home and family life of children. The role of parents in socialisation and child care is receiving more attention. It could be argued that the state and other institutions will become more important in children's early lives as their human rights grow in importance. But it would be better to build more synergies between home and pre-school provision, to help parents support their children better and to acknowledge their achievements.

Children are a diverse a group and childhood is not a universal process . The cultures and settings in which they live are multifarious. We should take a more positive view of the ways in which children around the world are raised, and pay more respect to approaches from outside North America and Europe.

At the same time, too many societies deny children their basic rights and needs. In Trinidad and Tobago and in Dominica, the time has come to abandon the rhetoric of 'family breakdown'. Deficit models of family structure and mothers in poverty should be replaced by new ways of thinking in which children, especially young children, are placed at the centre of the discussion. This would shift attention to ways of promoting their rights by relieving some of the burdens of motherhood and developing effective support from the state and the wider community.

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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

● Through "Strengthening the Care Environment" we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable parents, families and communities to care for their children.
● Through "Successful Transitions: The Continuum from Home to School" we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
● Through "Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity" we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

Information on the series

Working Papers in Early Childhood Development is a 'work in progress' series that presents relevant findings and reflection on issues relating to early childhood care and development. The series acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas, often arising out of field work, evaluations and training experiences. As 'think pieces' we hope these papers will evoke responses and lead to further information sharing from among the readership.

The findings, interpretations, conclusions and opinions expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.