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CHILDREN, YOUTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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This chapter is a critical reflection on globalization and international development agendas that affect children and youth in Southeast Asia. Although most Southeast Asian nations have had sustained economic growth and some success in reducing relative and absolute poverty, accelerated globalization has exacerbated income inequality, and the ranks of the urban poor have been swelling rapidly (Murray and Overton 2014; OECD 2015; Asia Foundation 2016; Indonesia Investment 2014). A clear manifestation of growing inequality in the region is the increased marginalization of less powerful members of society – including children and youth. Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of poverty, especially if they are: a member of a minority ethnic group, living in rural or remote areas, or among the urban poor. This chapter highlights key development indicators of child well-being in Southeast Asia, and then focuses on how poor children in the region are typically socially constructed as victims within development discourse, and how programs that have been designed to protect and 'save' them are often based on preconceived, patronizing Western ideas that reinscribe their victimhood. The chapter then explores the lives and aspirations of marginalized children, including street children in Indonesia and Cambodia, children in post-tsunami Aceh, and forced migrant children from Myanmar who are growing up on the borders in Thailand, China and Malaysia. Many of the children in these populations are also stateless (Ball et al. 2014).

It is widely recognized that 'childhood' is a culturally and historically specific construct (Aries 1962; Holloway and Valentine 2001; Ansell 2004). In addition, notions of childhood relate to the global capitalist economy and the subsequent ways in which the elite in many countries have been influenced by the 'global export of modern childhood' (Stephens 1995, 15). The importance of children and youth in international development agendas was validated by the almost universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations 1989). Following the ratification of the UNCRC by all Southeast Asian nations, a key concern of regional development agendas has been implementing those rights – in particular to improve the welfare of millions of children and youth living in poverty, including working children. In 1992 the International Labor Organization (ILO) created the International Program against Child Labor (IPEC) (Bessell 1998; ILO 2016a) and Convention 182 against the Worst Forms of Child Labor in 1999 (ILO 1999). In 2000, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focused on the rights of children, emphasizing a

child's right to education and survival, reduction of infant and child mortality rates and universal access to primary education (United Nations 2015a).

Within scholarly development discourse the concept of the 'global child' enshrined within the UNCRC immediately generated extensive critique (Stephens 1995; Burman 1996; Penn 2005; Pence and Hix-Small 2009). Critics have pointed to the Euro-centric construction of the necessary conditions for child development, the goals and ideal outcomes of childhood, and the Western imposition of presumed 'best practices' for ensuring family, community and public contributions to children's well-being, irrespective of country, community or cultural contexts (Stephens 1995; Nieuwenhuys 1996; Pence and Hix-Small 2009). These precepts are often at odds with the lived realities of many children in Southeast Asia, with its vast cultural diversity resulting in a huge spectrum of culturally based approaches to child-rearing and public services to support child survival, health and development. Euro-Western goals for child development, foundational theories of child development, and the goals of interventions informed by Euro-Western values and practices seem particularly at odds with the realities and aspirations of children and youth who are poor and marginalized (Penn 2002).

This chapter takes up these issues with a focus on the realities of children and youth living in Southeast Asian nations who exist in diverse communities, on the margins of society. Drawing on findings of participatory research with children in Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar, the chapter explores different sociocultural norms and styles of child-rearing that challenge Western conceptions of 'family' and 'childhood.' The discussion highlights the importance of the cultural role of community networks and the feelings of filial responsibility that sometimes motivate children to work to contribute to household incomes.

Emphasizing children's emotional geographies (Blazek and Kraftl 2015) and children's agency in seeking solutions for survival, the chapter challenges assumptions that children living in poverty and in vulnerable situations are passive and helpless victims in need of protection. Instead, the chapter contends that policy makers, practitioners and scholars can bring theories of child development into the twenty-first century, and increase the dignity and effectiveness of interventions by bringing children and youth into both the research process and decision-making about policies and programs that are intended to support them (Beazley 2015a). The chapter concludes by reflecting on what the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015–2030 (United Nations 2015b) may mean for children and youth in Southeast Asia in the next 15 years.

Key indicators of child and youth well-being in the region

Before a discussion of marginalized children's experiences in Southeast Asia, it is useful to highlight some indicators of children's well-being in the region, including infant and child mortality, access to primary and secondary school, and the numbers of children who are in the workforce. Drawing upon reports on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations 2015a) and UNICEF's "State of the World's Children" (2015a), the overview provided here focuses on the status of children in Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar from 2000 to 2015 (United Nations 2015a). These indicators illustrate the significant variations among children in Southeast Asia on key dimensions of well-being.

While the proportion of children and youth within populations in other parts of the world is diminishing (United Nations Development Program 2016), children and youth under the age of 24 account for nearly half of the population in Southeast Asia (CIA 2015). For example, in Cambodia, with a population of 15.7 million, 51 percent are under 24 years old; in Indonesia,

with a population of 256 million, 43 percent are under 24 years old, and in Myanmar, with a population of 56.3 million, 44 percent are under 24 years old (CIA 2015).

Socio-economic status

Many socio-economic factors underpin development issues relating to children's well-being. The Human Development Index (HDI) is an important indicator for comparative appraisal of development in the Southeast Asia region and is a tool developed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to measure and rank countries' levels of social and economic development (UNDP 2016). HDI is a summary measure (on a scale between 0 and 1, where 0 indicates the lowest human development and 1 the highest), and based on four criteria: life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling, and gross national income per capita. Singapore has the highest human development in the Southeast Asia region with an HDI of 0.91 and Malaysia also has a high HDI with 0.77 (UNDP 2016) (Table 17.1). Indonesia has a 'medium' HDI of 0.68. At the lower end of the spectrum, Myanmar has the lowest human development in the region with an HDI of 0.53. Cambodia and Laos also score low with 0.55 and 0.57 respectively (Table 17.1) (UNDP 2016).

Within Southeast Asia, the poorest nations are Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos. Income inequality is also a significant issue in the region and particularly conspicuous in Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia (World Bank 2014). Rising inequality is associated with lower economic and social mobility for younger generations (World Bank 2014). Today, 7.7 percent of Southeast Asian youth are unemployed (ILO 2016b).

Poverty, hunger and health

Southeast Asian nations contributed to the global achievement of the MDG of reducing extreme poverty by half (United Nations 2015a). In Indonesia, between 2005 and 2013, the

Table 17.1 Positional ranking based on children's well-being

	Country	*IMR 2013*	*CMR 2013*	*Underweight (%) in 2013*	*Stunting (%) in 2013*	*Expected years of schooling 2014*	*HDI 2014*
1st	Singapore	2	3	3	4	15.4	0.91
2nd	Malaysia	7	9	13	17	12.7	0.77
3rd	Brunei	8	10	–	–	14.5	0.85
4th	Thailand	11	13	9	16	13.5	0.72
5th	Vietnam	19	24	36	47	11.9	0.66
6th	Indonesia	25	29	20	36	13.0	0.68
7th	Philippines	24	30	20	30	11.3	0.66
8th	Cambodia	33	38	29	41	10.9	0.55
9th	Myanmar	40	51	23	35	8.6	0.53
10th	Timor-Leste	46	55	45	58	11.7	0.59
11th	Laos	54	71	27	44	10.6	0.57

Sources: UNICEF "State of the World's Children" (2015a) and UNDP *Human Development Reports* (2016)

number of people living in poverty fell from 16 percent to 11.5 percent (29 million people) (United Nations 2015a). However, the World Bank (2014) reports that there are 68 million 'near-poor' Indonesians who are living just above the poverty line. In 2015, more than one-third of 15.3 million Cambodians still lived below the poverty line on less than US$1.25 a day (UNICEF 2016). In Myanmar 26 percent of the 51.4 million population are living in poverty (UNDP 2016).

The MDG goal of reducing extreme hunger by half was achieved by 2015 in Southeast Asia: the proportion of undernourished people has fallen from 31 percent in 1990 to 10 percent in 2015, and among children under 5 years old, malnutrition fell from 31 percent to 16 percent between 1990 and 2015 in the region as a whole (United Nations 2015a). Yet, malnutrition remains a salient concern for children in the region, again pointing to inequities in access to basic requirements for normative growth and development. Children in Cambodia are particularly affected by malnutrition: 41 percent of children under 5 have moderate to severe stunting (below normative height for age) and 29 percent are underweight (UNICEF 2015a). Stunting affects 36 percent of children under 5 in Indonesia while 20 percent of children below the age of 5 are underweight (UNICEF 2015a). In Myanmar 35 percent of children under 5 are stunted and 23 percent are underweight (UNICEF 2015a).

By 2015, Southeast Asia achieved the MDG target for reduced infant mortality (IMR) to 24 deaths per 1000 live births by 2015,[1] and the MDG target for reduced child mortality (CMR) to from 71 to 27 deaths per 1,000 live births (United Nations 2015a). However, significant disparities between and within Southeast Asian countries persist. Recent demographic data demonstrates that children are most able to thrive in Singapore and Malaysia (UNICEF 2015a). As shown in Table 17.1, Singapore has one of the lowest IMR (2 deaths per 1,000 live births) and the lowest CMR (3 deaths per 1,000 live births), followed by Malaysia (7/1,000 and 9/1,000) and Brunei (8/1,000 and 10/1,000). Countries with the lowest rates of child survival are Timor-Leste (IMR 45/1,000 and CMR 55/1,000), Myanmar (IMR 40/1,000 and CMR 51/1,000), and Cambodia (IMR 33/1,000 and CMR 38/1,000), where children continue to suffer avoidable debilitating health and nutritional problems and experience the highest infant and child mortality rates (UNICEF 2015a) (Table 17.1).

While Indonesia ranked sixth in the region for infant and child mortality rates (IMR 23/1,000 live births and CMR 29/1,000 live births), Eastern Indonesia had far higher rates of infant mortality with 58 per 1,000 live births (UNICEF 2016). Almost half of infant deaths in Indonesia were attributed to complications from premature birth, still births and severe infections including pneumonia, meningitis and septicemia (UNICEF 2016).

Education

As one of the MDGs, access to education in the region has improved considerably in the past decade (UNESCAP 2013). While a 91 percent literacy rate for youth globally was predicted for 2015, Southeast Asia appears to have surpassed this with a 98 percent literacy rate among youth aged under 24 years old (United Nations 2015a). However, specific populations of children who have low or no access to primary education have been identified in the region: "Future interventions will have to be tailored to the needs of specific groups of children – particularly girls, children belonging to minorities and nomadic communities, children engaged in child labor and children living with disabilities, in conflict situations or in urban slums" (United Nations 2015a, 27). Children with disabilities are also predominant among children out of school in the region (UNESCAP 2013). In terms of the number of years a child is expected to stay in school, in 2014 Singapore ranked the highest with an expected 15.4 years of schooling (Table 17.1).

Indonesia has an average of 13 years of expected schooling, Cambodia 10.9 and Myanmar 8.6 of expected schooling for each child (Table 17.1).

While the net primary school enrollment has increased in the region, expanding access to secondary education has been more challenging with a net secondary school enrolment rate of 77 percent Southeast Asia as a whole (World Bank 2016b). As well, persisting lower participation by girls compared to boys has been attributed to "negative social and cultural attitudes, lack of appreciation of the value of female education, the burden of household work and long journeys to school" (UNESCAP 2013, 2).

Dominant perceptions versus local realities

The first half of this chapter established some promising trends and outstanding challenges affecting the well-being of children and youth in the region. The second half of the chapter considers Western discourses of development, and how these dominant perceptions have influenced the international policies and practices concerning children, especially those in vulnerable situations and those involved in labor at a young age. The section begins with an overview of global discourses on child labor and vulnerable children, and then for illustrative purposes reflects on the authors' own participatory research with children in Southeast Asia. We focus on the experiences of children working on the streets in Indonesia and Cambodia; disaster management and development for children after the devastating tsunami in Indonesia; and forced migrant children from Myanmar. By contrasting the social and cultural complexity of these children's lived experiences against the dominant perspectives and representations instilled in development discourse and programming, the chapter raises questions about what we really know about the goals and trajectories of children's development in vulnerable situations in the region. The chapter also calls for an interrogation of the assumptions that inform prescriptions for interventions intended to close equity gaps and promote optimal developmental outcomes.

Global discourses on child labor

The ratification of the UNCRC in 1990 gave impetus to a surge of international interest in child labor in the region, especially relating to the international economy, globalization and urbanization. In Southeast Asia, 77.8 million children aged 5 to 17 years, or 9.3 percent of the region's children, are in the labor force (United States Department of Labor 2014). Most frequently, children work for very low wages in agriculture, factories, cottage industries and the urban informal sector, such as working in roadside stalls, as market 'coolies,' shoe-shining, scavenging, selling newspapers, parking cars, washing car windows and busking (ILO 2016a). As well, some children engage in unwaged domestic duties in exchange for food and shelter (ILO 2016a). Child labor is rooted in poverty, history, culture and global inequality (Lloyd-Evans 2014). Most children in the Southeast Asia region are engaged in forms of labor that violate their right to be protected from work that is dangerous, harmful to health or a barrier to education (ILO 2016a).

In 1992, the International Labor Organization (ILO) created the International Program against Child Labor (ILO 2016a; Bessell 1998) as a response to these violations. The IPEC program targeted elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor as expressed in IPEC's Convention 182 (ILO 1999). IPEC fostered significant improvements to the state of child labor in Southeast Asia. In 2014, five ASEAN countries were reported to have improved their legal frameworks for protecting children from hazardous work (USDL 2014). For example, in 2002, Indonesia, adopted the Child Protection Law (Law No 23), which protects children under 18 years old from a variety of abuses and prohibits the employment of children in the worst

forms of child labor, such as forced or bonded labor, sexual exploitation and the trafficking of drugs (Hitzemann 2004; ILO 2016a). In Thailand, the minimum age requirements were raised to 15 years old for agricultural workers and 18 years old for working on fishing boats (USDL 2014).

While exploitive, unsafe and harmful child labor has obstructed healthy development for already vulnerable children throughout the region, a growing body of research has shown that not all forms of work are detrimental for children. Many children take pride in supporting themselves and their families financially (White 1994; Ennew et al. 2005; Beazley 2015a). Yet, interventions inspired by the UNCRC and other Euro-Western tools have tended to cast an over-generalized, negative pall over the concept of child labor and failed to engage children and youth in generating a more nuanced and contextualized perspective on what children's involvement in specific kinds of work means and achieves under various conditions and in varied cultural and economic contexts (White 1994; Lloyd-Evans 2014).

The imposition of Western constructions of childhood and the requirements for growth and development are also evident in the meanings attached to particular public 'spaces' and their judged appropriateness for children (Beazley 2003; Beazley 2016; Lloyd-Evans 2014). For example, within this discourse children working in industrial complexes or on the streets are particularly considered to be 'out of place' (Lloyd-Evans 2014). Most families in Southeast Asia subscribe to culturally based constructions of childhood that may draw upon some Western concepts and aspirations but that are grounded in local realities, values and goals. Given rising global economic insecurity and income inequalities, poor children and families are particularly likely to consider children's involvement in wage-earning as an opportunity to supplement family income (Beazley 2003; Beazley and Miller 2016). Children's agency must be considered: children may make an active choice to work, motivated by cultural expectations of filial duty and contribution to the household income, and children may garner new skills and an enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy as a result (Beazley 2003; Bessell 2009; van Blerk 2006).

Example 1: street connected children

With the exception of Singapore, children living on the streets without supervision or protection of an adult are almost ubiquitous in cities across Southeast Asia. Nobody knows how many street children there are in Southeast Asia. This is in part because they are highly mobile and many have not been registered at birth and have no identity documents (Beazley 2003). As a result, they are effectively stateless. Most street connected children are boys aged 8 to 17 years, although the number of street girls is increasing in the region (Beazley 2008). Street children are most prevalent in poorer countries where there is a robust urban informal sector, including Indonesia, Timor-Leste, the Philippines and Myanmar, where they engage in a variety of income-generating activities. For example, in Indonesia street-dwelling boys often shine shoes, sell bottled water, cigarettes and other goods, wash car windows and busk or beg (Beazley 2003). In Cambodia they sell books, postcards, trinkets and bottled water to tourists (Beazley and Miller 2016). Factors influencing the prevalence of street children in Southeast Asian cities include rapid urbanization, forced migration, internal displacement, growing income inequality, poverty, consumerism, conflict, famine, natural disasters, family breakdowns and the increase of domestic violence.

Street children are commonly believed to have been orphaned or abandoned by neglectful parents, and they are often seen as belonging to groups organized by adults to beg or commit crime. However, it is helpful to unsettle these generic and stigmatizing perceptions of street

connected children in light of a growing global discourse on child labor and children's rights. Although research is limited, available evidence points to many reasons why children start to work and live on the streets and their experiences and outcomes are diverse. For example, Beazley and Miller (2016) describe how, in Siem Reap, Cambodia, children attend school, work on the street for part of the day, live at home and have continuous family contact. Others are no longer in school and spend all their days on the streets but go home at night. Sometimes these children become involved with the subculture of street-entrenched children, eventually moving away from home altogether (Beazley 2003, 2016). These children are essentially homeless, as they live, work and spend the majority of their time on the streets, and have very little if any contact with their families (Beazley 2003).

In Indonesia, the Philippines and Cambodia, street children are often portrayed by the media and the state as undesirable social pariahs who are a blight on the city's landscape. Due to this social construction, there is an almost universal negative response to them in cities throughout the region: they are both spatially and socially oppressed through multiple forms of social control, marginalization and physical oppression by the state and society. This is often in the form of verbal abuse, evictions, arrests, beatings, abuse and torture while in police custody, and other infringements of children's basic human rights (Beazley 2003; Beazley and Miller 2016). There are numerous accounts of state 'cleansing operations' occurring in cities in the Philippines, Cambodia and Indonesia, when children have been physically cleared off the streets and dumped out of town, or arrested and beaten, and sometimes killed (Beazley 2003; Beazley and Miller 2016).

Many non-governmental organizations in the region have vigorously invested in programs seeking to 'rescue' children by taking them off the streets, often without their consent, and placing them in institutions or returning them home. Typically, these programs counter dominant media images of street-dwelling children as criminals by portraying them in funding campaigns as helpless and abandoned victims. Children's own preferences, agency or the meanings that they ascribe to their lives are afforded little if any regard (Wells 2010; Allerton 2014). In participatory child-centered research by Beazley (2016), children living on the streets in Yogyakarta reported that they had no desire to leave the street or to return home. This was in spite of an ILO-IPEC target to return 25 children to their family homes each month from the NGO they attended (Beazley 2016). In recent years more effective strategies have been developed for street frequenting children in some Southeast Asian nations, based on rights-based advocacy agendas, with respect for children's rights on the parts of governments and police, and the provision of appropriate services through drop-in centers and outreach programs (West 2003).

Example 2: children and disaster management

The second example is focused on children in disaster situations in the region. The role of children and youth as agents and drivers of change has been acknowledged in the global commitment for child-centered forms of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) (UNISDR 2015). Save the Children (2010, 4), argues that "children should not be seen as victims, but as actors in addressing the impacts of natural disasters and climate change on their lives and the life of their community." Strategies that embody this view include engaging children in risk and disaster impact assessments, disaster reduction and post-disaster planning and preparation, and evaluations of disaster risk reduction and management strategies (Save the Children 2010).

Disasters are prevalent in Southeast Asian nations: active tectonic plates give rise to earthquakes and tsunamis; cyclones and typhoons are generated by the Indian and Pacific oceans; and

mountain ranges combined with deforestation yield frequent landslides and flash floods (UNESCAP 2015). It is widely recognized that children and youth suffer the most negative impacts from disaster including a third to half of disaster-related deaths (Save the Children 2010). Dangers include immediate injury and death, illness and malnutrition. Disasters also cause children psychological trauma and emotional distress through family separation and death, loss of home, abrupt changes to daily life including ability to attend school, and abuse or exploitation of children in vulnerable situations (Save the Children 2010). Interviews with children in Southeast Asia reveal that following a disaster they are primarily impacted by disruption to their education (Save the Children 2010). For example, following the 2011 tsunami in Thailand, 2,000 schools were temporarily closed due to structural damage, and in the 2012 typhoon in the Philippines, 551 schools were closed due to damage, affecting 100,000 children (Save the Children Australia 2014).

The 2004 earthquakes and tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia, severely impacted children: an estimated 200,000 people died and over 550,000 children were left homeless, including an estimated 50,000 'tsunami orphans' (Gunawan 2005; Moore 2005). The established response on the part of international relief agencies was to place separated and presumed orphaned children in residential institutions. A deluge of financial aid for 'tsunami orphans' led to the rapid construction of over 35 orphanages in Aceh where 2,600 children were placed (Martin and Sudrajat 2006). However, a majority of children who were thought to be 'tsunami orphans' by international aid agencies were in fact not orphaned. By 2006, it was determined that more than 85 percent of the children who were placed into orphanages or religious boarding schools after the tsunami had at least one parent alive, and 42 percent still had both parents (Martin and Sudrajat 2006; Save the Children 2006; Beazley 2015b; Riley, 2013). International organizations at the time did not recognize the significance and resilience of extended family systems, many of which could absorb children who had lost their parents (Beazley 2015b; Abebe 2009).

For many economically destitute and displaced families, institutional care for their children seemed the only option available because the bulk of relief funding was directed to building children's homes, rather than providing families with the support they needed to care for their children (Save the Children 2006; Beazley 2015b). Conversely, funding to these institutions was based on the number of children that they supported; hence, many parents were reportedly encouraged to place their children in institutional care (Martin and Sudrajat 2006). For organizations and administrators, there was an incentive to recruit children and to keep them as long as possible (Save the Children 2006; Beazley 2015b).

The need for humanitarian and international development policy to reconsider long-term residential care as a child protection strategy in disaster situations was revealed through participatory, child-led research with children living in three institutions in Aceh (Beazley et al. 2009; Beazley 2015b). Violations of children's rights were uncovered in all three orphanages, including systematic physical and verbal abuse by carers, teachers and other children; life threateningly poor nutrition, hygiene and living conditions, lack of healthcare and privacy, and strict regimentation and harsh discipline. Children also expressed their longing for family, friends and the opportunity to live in a family home, to enjoy the affection of a family member and siblings from whom many were separated through institutional placement (Save the Children 2006; Beazley 2015b).

The institutionalization of children in Aceh after the tsunami reflects the prevailing Western notion of best practices in humanitarian aid at the time. The decision disregarded the best interests of the children and their right to express an opinion in matters that affect them, enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). As Abebe (2009) and Riley (2013) have emphasized, Western donors and aid organizations' inaccurate, ethnocentric construction of disaster orphans have

failed to understand culturally based family structures, practices, resilience and needs. They have also disregarded the child's right to live in a family home, with institutional care only as a last resort and not as a default response as seen in Aceh.

Participatory, rights-based research with children, youth and their communities can ensure that disaster planning and post-disaster responses are appropriate for the region and affected communities, and that children's rights are not violated in the name of protection.

Example 3: forced migrant children from Myanmar

The final example is from Myanmar, which is the most significant contributor to the world's 60 million forced migrants[2] and refugees (UNHCR 2015). Since the military took control of Myanmar in 1962, millions of children and families facing violent suppression of ethnic minorities have fled their homeland to neighboring Thailand, China and Malaysia. Thailand, which shares a 2,401 kilometer border with Myanmar, has been host to the largest influx with approximately 2.5 million Myanmar migrants and refugees, of whom about one-fifth are under 19 years old (Refugees International 2004; UNHCR 2014).

Many forced migrant children and youth have experienced psychosocial trauma associated with armed conflict and family separation. Many lack identity documentation and are effectively stateless (Lynch 2010), unable to access formal systems of social protection, healthcare and education (Myanmar Education Integration Initiative [MEII], 2013). In some instances, children are unaccompanied: Some are sent by their families in search of safety and education; some are separated from their family during conflict and displacement; some are kidnapped by drug traffickers and militia; and some are orphaned (Committee for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights, Burma 2009).

Beginning in 2011, the Myanmar government began a political shift toward a participatory democracy. The new government has begun welcoming forced migrants to come home, and international aid to forced migrant children who continue to live outside of Myanmar is being withdrawn (MEII 2013). However, there are significant barriers to forced migrant children's reintegration, including: lack of documentation to prove that Myanmar is their country of origin; lack of education in the Myanmar language so that returning to Myanmar will significantly disrupt the continuity of any schooling they may have been able to access (often through non-formal learning programs) (Save the Children and World Education 2015); absence of a family or village to return to; and risks to their physical safety because of their ethnic and family heritage (Ball and Moselle, 2015). As well, some forced migrant children have spent most of their growing up years outside of Myanmar, and may not wish to return. These children's development narratives have not been systematically documented and their views and preferences about reintegration, assimilation into the country where they temporarily reside, or resettlement to a third country are not solicited in adult-led processes that determine their futures.

Perched on the precipice of multiple intersecting sources of uncertainty, these children's experiences and processes of development defy conventional understandings of childhood and identity formation. Global institutions, including international organizations, educational bodies and the media, tend to understand migrant children as passive agents who are dependent on parents, the state and international organizations to determine their well-being and future. They are often seen as victims, and their experiences are often understood as secondary products of their parents' primary narratives of displacement. By contrast, preliminary research by the second author suggests that forced migrant children and youth from Myanmar are eager to have their voices heard in decision-making about their futures – a right enshrined in Article 12 of the

UNCRC (1989). Although few have played active roles as instigators of their migration, their stories tell how, in order to survive and thrive, they must engage in dynamic meaning-making of their shifting circumstances and learn new skills and attitudes to understand and adapt. Suggesting a challenge to the binaries posited by foundational theories of children's development, the children's stories convey that they are both victims and agents, both vulnerable and resilient, and carriers of both their cultures of origin and of globalization. While some children and youth voice specific goals to return to Myanmar or to settle in another country, many are oriented to an open-ended future that they feel ready to actively create. This will be by drawing on internal resources they have generated as liminal children growing up in extremely difficult circumstances on the margins of mainstream societies in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Southeast Asia is a highly diverse region with thousands of linguistic, cultural and social groups and varied populations of children and youth. Generalizations across all communities and countries are likely to have as many exceptions as confirming cases. However, this chapter points to significant indicators of progress for some populations on some important dimensions, including infant and child mortality, access to primary school and quality of life. While it can be concluded that conditions for children and youth in the region are decidedly improving, income inequality is increasing and in every country there are some children whose lives are extremely difficult due to chronic conditions, such as poverty and discrimination, or acute conditions, such as natural and anthropogenic disasters and epidemics. Political insurgencies and economic instability in some countries pose ongoing threats to children and families, particularly those who are already living in vulnerable circumstances. With an already high proportion of the world's young people and an overall high fertility rate, sustained efforts to generate valid, contextualized, nuanced understandings of the experiences, needs and goals of children and youth in the region and to create effective strategies to support their wellness must be a local, national and regional priority.

In this chapter, the three case studies from Southeast Asia illustrate how an understanding of the local cultural circumstances of children's lives must be explored to assess the relevance of Western constructions of what is best for children in developing country contexts (Penn 2005). The case studies reveal how poor children in the region are frequently represented as only victims within development discourse and how programs designed to protect them are often based on Western perceptions that underline their vulnerability. The rights-based participatory research utilized in the case studies, however, demonstrates the imperative of accessing children's own self-reported views of their lived experiences in order to gain a clearer understanding of their lives and to better address their needs through appropriate and sustainable interventions.

In September 2015 the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched, following expiry of the MDGS. What has become known as the 'post-2015 agenda' includes 17 new global goals for the next 15 years (2015–2030), many of which implicate or affect children and youth. In 2015 a UNICEF report (UNICEF 2015b) describes how the SDGs build on MDG successes in addressing maternal and child mortality, poverty, hunger, primary education and gender equality, while also elevating the importance of reducing child poverty and violence against children through enhanced social protection systems. While the SDGs hold tremendous promise, they do not specify the means by which targets are to be achieved. Looking at this open-endedness as an opportunity, scholars, policy decision-makers, child-serving international and local organizations, and practitioners have ample justification and scope to bring into

sharper focus the cultural contexts of children's development and children's own views about how to improve the quality of life for children in Southeast Asia and around the world.

Notes

1 For comparison, in Australia the 2015 infant mortality rate was 3/1,000 and the child mortality rate was 4/1,000 (World Bank 2016a).
2 The International Organization for Migration defines forced migrants as individuals who "leave their countries to escape persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood" (IOM 2000).

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