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"Children of the north": Reflections on an international conference in Bratsk, Siberia

My colleague Professor Per Olav Tiller and I represented The Norwegian Centre for Child Research at an international conference on "Children of the North," held in Bratsk, Siberia, February 21-25. Consideration of this conference - in terms not only of the content of conference presentations, but also in light of its social, economic and political contexts - illuminates the complex, contradictory and challenging situations of Russian children today. Reflections on this conference also suggest possible directions for future international collaborations among researchers concerned with the globally interconnected conditions of children in different world regions.

Framework of the conference

The conference was one in a series organized by the Winter Cities Association, a network of northern cities designed to deal with common problems and challenges of "winter cities" throughout North America, Europe, Japan and the former USSR and to promote development and tourism in these regions. Funding and organizational assistance for the Bratsk conference came from the Winter Cities group, as well as from the Russian federal government, the government of Irkutsk province, and the city of Bratsk. In comparison with many other cities in the former USSR, Bratsk is relatively wealthy, due to its large hydroelectric dam, paper and pulp industries, and mining resources. City administrators note that the biggest problem for Bratsk is, in fact, overproduction, insofar as consumers in

Sharon Stephens

other regions cannot afford to pay for energy and commodities produced in the Bratsk area.

The topic "Children of the North" was chosen by the Bratsk municipal administration, with broad support from the local community. I. Nevmerzhitsky, head of Bratsk administration, stated: "The harsh conditions of northern communities make us seek acceptable solutions for providing adequate living conditions for the growing generation."

Conference organizers stress that this initiative must be understood within a larger global context of concern with children's rights and life conditions, as manifested, for example, in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The formal conference description observes that the Convention "gives the highest priority to children's harmonious development, both federally and regionally, when it comes to budgeting and distribution of resources, merchandise for children, and investments in construction." This phrasing is revealing, I think, insofar as it emphasizes the need to provide services and resources for children's healthy development, but does not stress the importance of children's own creative agency and social participation. (Recall the "3 P's" of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - Protection, Provision and Participation. The Bratsk conference very clearly emphasized the first two over the last.)

"Children of the North" is the name of a specific program area under the Russian federal program "Children of Russia," set up to provide necessary services and protection to groups of children regarded as being at special risk. (Other groups within this program include "Children of Chernobyl," "Disabled Children," and "Orphans.") Children in the northern regions are seen as being at special risk and as having special needs, insofar as they live in areas "far from cultural centers" and in regions characterized by "especially harsh living conditions." There is also increasing concern, at both federal and regional levels, about the health consequences for children of large-scale industrial development within fragile Arctic and sub-Arctic environments.

Concern with the welfare and futures of children was striking in conversations with people in Bratsk, including not only conference officials, but also local guides, interpreters, and school and hospital personnel. Bratsk is a city with a limited historical past and an uncertain future. The city itself is only 35 years old. It was founded in the Siberian tundra in order to construct and maintain the world's largest hydroelectric dam. Announcements in newspapers throughout the

former USSR called for strong, visionary young people to help realize the Soviet dream. Those who responded to the call spent their first year in tents. Winter conditions were so severe that workers frequently had to take 15 minute shifts in order to avoid serious frostbite.

The original population of Bratsk was ninety-five percent male, so another call was sent out to women. The only days men took free from work on the dam were the days they met trainloads of women arriving at the Bratsk station. In the two years that followed, Bratsk had the highest marriage and birth rates in the USSR. Work on the dam had to be halted for some time in order to construct the physical framework for a society - housing, schools, a hospital and city hall. Today, Bratsk is a city of over 300,000. The architecture is almost exclusively large-scale, high-rise buildings, reflecting the necessity for rapid construction of an entire urban infrastructure and the dominance of functional over aesthetic concerns.

The ethos of the city is one of human determination to conquer nature and harness natural forces to human ends. During a visit to the dam site, our guide (herself the daughter of people who had heeded the call to build a new world in the Siberian wilderness) was both ironic and proud, as she spoke of the "gigantomaniac" motivations of the dam-builders, who had shared the Soviet collective dream of building the biggest of everything.

She related a story known to every local schoolchild about the mythical origins of Siberia, a Tatar-derived name meaning "the sleeping land." When God created the world, he had an enormous bag of valuable minerals and ores that he intended to distribute equally over the earth, but his hands froze over Siberia and he dropped the bag. In anger, he took steps to make sure that human beings could never get these riches for themselves. He covered Siberia with permafrost, impenetrable forests and rock formations, and small insects capable of driving human beings to distraction. It was only in the 20th century that people were able, through extraordinary determination, strength and scientific knowledge, to find ways to extract the riches of the Siberian wilderness - in a sense, to outwit God himself.

The ethos of humans triumphing over natural obstacles is palpable here and extends to a desire to triumph over current social problems as well - for example, unemployment, outmigration, and widespread social dislocation associated with the breakup of the Soviet empire. But there is also a growing sense of limits to "gigantomaniac," state-steered projects, most notably with respect to accumulating evidence of the colossal environmental and health costs of largely unregulated

Sharon Stephens

industrial production. In a very real sense, children's bodies, minds and futures are the terrains upon which contradiction-laden processes of economic, social and political change are now being played out.

The Bratsk conference on "Children of the North" was intended as a forum for discussing some of these processes and for creating viable alternatives for children's futures. This was true, I think, even though a number of the conference activities - particularly those connected to the session on "Business and Tourism" - made little explicit reference to children, and though relatively few conference participants represented fields we might conventionally include under the heading of "child research." Conference organizers sought to bring together natural and social scientists, businesspeople, politicians, architects and educators to identify common problems facing "Children of the North" and to begin exploring possibilities for cooperative international solutions.

This was the first international conference ever held in Bratsk. It was clearly not just a limited administrative endeavor, but was in many respects a city-wide project. Signs announcing the conference were posted throughout the city, and a number of local institutions - hospitals, clinics, schools and kindergartens - organized tours, exhibits and concerts for conference participants. The trade fair and children's art exhibit associated with the conference were widely attended by Bratsk residents.

The conference was regarded as important not only for the city of Bratsk, but for the whole Irkutsk province. A meeting of 51 mayors in the region was scheduled to coincide with the international conference. (At the welcoming banquet on the first evening, I sat next to a man who had founded his own town and is now mayor of a municipality of 8 people. He had come 280 kilometers by ski to attend the joint conference and mayors' meeting.)

There were over 450 conference participants, but only 30 foreigners. The Conference organizers had expected more and had hoped that people would also bring along their families, but the uncertain political situation in Russia, together with difficulties and perceived dangers of travelling in Siberia, resulted in a disappointingly small number of foreign participants. Those foreigners who did attend were extraordinarily well cared for by conference organizers. For example, an English-speaking guide was sent from Bratsk to Moscow to meet our group of four researchers from the Nordic region and accompany us on the five and a half hour plane trip back to Bratsk. (In addition to Per Olav Tiller and myself, the

Nordic group included Rose Marie Steinsvik, an architect from Tromsø with a special interest in buildings adapted to children's needs in northern regions, and Svein Kristiansen, also from Tromsø and vice-president of the Winter Cities Association.)

What did conference organizers and funders hope to get from this meeting? Clearly there were many complex aims, some working in tandem and others at cross-purposes: to focus scholarly attention on the special situations of children in northern regions and, in particular, to highlight children's environmentally-related health problems; to develop new approaches to the construction of urban infrastructures and to the education of children, in order to meet the challenges of a society undergoing rapid and far-reaching changes; to promote economic development and tourism in the region; and to develop regional, national and international networks of researchers, politicians and businesspeople.

Much of what went on at this conference took place during informal business meetings and the lavish receptions held for provincial mayors and businesspeople. The four designated conference themes, explored in parallel sessions, were: Children and Environment, Education, Architecture, and Business and Tourism.

Children and environment

The session in which I participated focused on the officially designated "extreme ecological situation" in the Bratsk region and its wide-ranging consequences for children's health. V.N. Kaznachejev (Researcher, Russian Academy of Medical Sciences) provided a general overview of "Human ecology in the northern territories." Because of difficult living conditions in the northern regions and the predominant orientation of northern industry to primary resource extraction, industrial development in these regions has tended to emphasize large-scale enterprises linked to a few urban centers. Concentrated and often heavily polluting industrial production easily disrupts fragile northern ecosystems, where low temperatures and sparse vegetation provide limited possibilities for the breakdown and recycling of waste products. Pressures during the Soviet period to meet unrealistic five year plans, the tendency of Soviet federal planners to seek maximum returns from "internal colonies" in Siberia, heavily chemicalized agricultural practices, and present-day economic problems and bureaucratic disorganization linked to worn-out industrial equipment and poorly formulated or

Sharon Stephens

inadequately enforced environmental regulations have resulted in the widespread contamination of air, surface and ground waters, soil, vegetation and animal life.

N.N. Yushkov (Head of the Bratsk City Environment and Land-Tenure Department) reported on "Environmental problems of the city of Bratsk." Scientists have identified extensive forest damage up to 40 kilometers outside the city limits and polluted river waters up to 160 kilometers away from contaminating sources. The most seriously polluting industries are the aluminium plant and the pulp and paper plant, releasing large amounts of untreated chemical byproducts (predominantly fluoride and chlorine) into the atmosphere and local waters. (The paper plant was closed for the duration of the conference, mainly in order to improve air quality for foreign visitors.) Yushkov noted that an economic upswing in Russia would result in even greater environmental problems in the Bratsk region, where most enterprises are presently operating at only partial capacity. The massive Bratsk hydroelectric dam has also caused disruptions in the riverine ecosystem, leading, for example, to problems in the reproductive cycles of fish.

S.I. Kolesnikov (Chairman of the East Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences) reported on "Major problems of children's health in Siberia," a region characterized by higher rates of childhood cancers and leukemias than in European Russia or western Europe, higher rates of children's respiratory problems, various thyroid diseases and other hormonal imbalances in children, and a widespread phenomenon Russian scientists are calling "chemical AIDS" - generalized immune system problems, particularly striking in children, that are associated with chemical contamination of the air, soil, water and foods. Kolesnikov referred to medical research suggesting that 80% of the 65,000 children in Bratsk suffer from some level of immunological dysfunction.

Kolesnikov also noted higher incidences of difficult pregnancies and miscarriages in the Bratsk region. He and other speakers noted that, despite pronatal government policies and people's desires for children, declining birth rates in Siberian regions of "extreme ecological situations" are resulting in demographic shifts to an older and older population.

A number of speakers called for development of detoxification/rehabilitation programs (for example, microelement and vitamin supplements to help redress systemic imbalances), as well as for stricter environmental legislation controlling contamination at the source and for higher taxes and penalties on the most

polluting industries. V.S. Kazakov (Vice-mayor of Bratsk) raised a dissenting voice in his presentation on "Implementation of the federal environmental programme entitled 'Ecology of Bratsk'." Kazakov noted a growing administrative concern with connections among health, environment and industry, but asserted that the ecological problem is not the primary or most immediate problem. The first problem, he said, is survival of the city and local industries: "People say we do not have enough high quality housing and schools, that our children are not healthy enough. But what are the root problems of this? They are social structural. We do not have sufficient financial resources to provide our children with high quality health care and the institutional frameworks they need for healthy development. Without a strong economic base, there is no possibility of putting into action the health care and environmental clean-up measures being called for by scientists."

V.A. Trufakin (Researcher, Russian Academy of Medical Sciences) noted in his presentation on "Environmental problems, public health care and medical research in Russia" that one major difficulty in controlling polluting industries is the way in which maximum permissible levels of contamination are presently set. In many cases, he asserted, strong industrial lobbies are able to influence the setting of these levels to the extent that each enterprise is allowed to produce the levels of contamination required by its present mode of production. Trufakin went on to observe that in many areas of Russia today it would be "difficult to find a truly healthy child."

As a social scientist working in the area of environmental risk perception and the sociology of science, I was struck by a certain gap between the concerns of Russian and foreign researchers (myself included). Anthony Miller (Chairman, Dept. of Preventative Medicine, University of Toronto) reported on "Epidemiological studies on the effects of electromagnetic fields associated with extra-high voltage transmission in North America." Miller noted growing evidence for a link between exposure to electromagnetic fields (associated, for example, with high power electrical transmission cables) and increased risks for childhood cancers and nervous system problems. He also noted increased risks for these health problems in the offspring of workers in "electrical occupations" - i.e., occupations, such as work at the Bratsk dam site, where workers are likely to be exposed to particularly high levels of electromagnetic radiation.

These findings are potentially of tremendous importance to the Bratsk region, with many residential areas and schools located beneath high-power electrical

Sharon Stephens

transmission lines leading out from the dam. A good deal of Miller's talk, however, focused on possible health risks associated with the use of small household appliances, such as hairdryers. One Russian researcher observed: "With all due respect to our esteemed colleague from Canada, it would be a welcome luxury for us to worry about our children's use of hairdryers."

My own paper, reporting on an International Network for the Study of Children and Radiation currently being developed at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research, argued that it is crucially important to take children's distinctive biology and exposure routes into consideration when setting "safe" or "acceptable" levels of exposure to various forms of ionizing and non-ionizing radiation, as well as to other environmental hazards. One of our aims in the Children and Environment Program at the Centre has been to cast a critical light on currently dominant international assessments of "safe" or "acceptable" radiation levels, often reached on the basis of risk assessment studies done on "normal" populations of healthy, adult, male workers in nuclear plants. A focus on young children and fetuses may call for significant reductions in legal exposure limits.

One of the few environmental hazards to which Bratsk residents are *not* particularly vulnerable is radiation, except for exposure to electromagnetic radiation. However, this may change if plans for locating a nuclear waste disposal site in the region are realized. In following the presentations presented by Russian researchers, I was struck by a gap between their primary concerns and concerns highlighted at our Centre. We have attempted to move out from a concern with children's health to critical perspectives on internationally accepted levels of exposure to environmental risks, while Russian researchers and policymakers are struggling to find ways of reducing current levels of contamination to internationally recognized "maximum permissible concentrations" (in many cases, tens or even hundreds of times lower than actually existing levels).

As we explore possibilities for international collaborations among researchers from different world regions, it is imperative that we be aware of the different social contexts for disparate research agendas, and that Western researchers not take their own concerns and approaches as the self-evident norms against which others should be assessed. I have explored elsewhere (Stephens 1994) the significantly different constellations of concerns and approaches that characterize children and environment research in eastern Europe and the former USSR, many parts of the Third World, and North America and western Europe.ⁱ In North America and Europe, much of the work that goes under the heading of "children

and environment" has been done by social scientists (for example, environmental psychologists). This research tends to stress children's understandings and uses of local environments, children's environmentally-conditioned life quality and social networks, and more recently, children's participation in environmental decision-making. In a region such as the former USSR, where environmentally-related health problems are so stark and immediately serious, where traditions of individual psychology and community studies have rarely been linked to policy, and where concerns with children's social participation and democratic rights are not as widespread, it is primarily medical researchers and environmental scientists who address the topic of "children and environment."

This was clearly the case at the Bratsk conference, where the aims in the Children and Environment session were to link health and environmental problems, to put children's compromised health on local and federal political agendas, and to put scientific weight behind calls for stricter environmental regulation and for detoxification/rehabilitation programs in areas of "extreme ecological situations." In his concluding statement on the Children and Environment session, S. I. Kolesnikov (session chairman) called for the establishment in Bratsk of an East Siberian Branch of the Russian Medical Academy. The major objective of this center would be health and environment-oriented studies in northern areas. Kolesnikov observed: "The Bratsk area is unfortunately a kind of 'laboratory' for the study of the dangerous impact of environmental contamination on human health, and especially on the health of the most vulnerable population, the children. This area should also be a kind of 'testing site' for developing programs of rehabilitation, with respect to both people and the environment."

Research being conducted in Russia on children and environment issues offers tremendously important insights for North American and European researchers, whose small-scale community and psychologically oriented studies could benefit from being located within broader regional and world system contexts, and whose social science oriented approaches might be usefully combined with natural science perspectives on environmental changes and children's health.

It is also the case, I would argue, that attention to the ways that Russian "children of the north" are particularly vulnerable to serious environmental risks does not exhaust the wide range of important topics that could, potentially, be included in discussions of children and the environment. For example, I would have liked to learn much more about how children in Bratsk perceive and move through their local environments, how they understand the wide-ranging changes in urban

infrastructures that are now being proposed (see discussion below of children and architecture), what sorts of changes in children's social networks accompany new building projects, and how children themselves think about their natural surroundings and the environmental problems that increasingly concern the adults around them. It is, after all, these children who will very soon have to make difficult decisions about how to balance considerations of economic growth, life quality, physical health, and environmental quality.

It was my sense at the Bratsk conference that there now is a great openness on the part of many Russian researchers to new approaches from "outside." One especially promising area is the field of children and environment, where Russian scientists and policymakers concerned with children/environment issues might draw upon the growing experience in the West and in parts of the Third World with research on children's own environmental experiences and with children's participation in environmental research and decision-making.

Children and development

I was not able to follow other sessions as closely as the children and environment discussions. Reports from colleagues who did attend these sessions - on education, architecture, and business and tourism - suggest that "Children of the North" were the focus of conflicting worries, concerns and hopes in these sessions as well.

Per Olav Tiller presented a paper in the Education session on "Children and nature: Animism, empathy, and other features of children's perception of nature." He argued that there is widespread evidence that young children experience the natural world not only as something to be controlled instrumentally, but more importantly as a world full of living things, for whom children can feel empathetic concern. Such perspectives, also widespread among so-called "nature peoples," represent important alternatives to the dominant Western paradigm, characterized by human attempts to master, control and profit from nature. Tiller argued that we are now seeing the consequences of this dominant orientation: widespread environmental deterioration and deteriorating human health and life quality.

While Tiller's presentation was placed in the Education session, it would also have made an important contribution to the Children and Environment session. The implication of his lecture was that if we are serious about developing effective environmental and human "rehabilitation programs," it is important to nurture and

develop children's empathetic, compassionate relationships with the natural world and to develop spaces within the adult world where such modes of thinking can have consequences for environmental decision-making.

But while Tiller argued for the necessity of moving from a focus on children's own perspectives to the development of critical perspectives on adult society, the general aim of the Education session was to bring together scientists, business-people and educators to explore ways of "educating cheerful and healthy youngsters" and "providing business-oriented education of young people." According to the conference description, "Education is the key to social and economic development of the North. However, isolation, cultural differences, and particular regional and local economic conditions have presented problems which have delayed or prevented maximization of education and the well-being of children."

Other presentations in the Education session included a discussion of the possibilities of "computerizing small cities and towns" (S.Z. Kartayev); "Planned leisure as an element of all-round development of the rising generation" (V.P. Demin, Deputy Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation); and "New trends in secondary and higher education" (A.Z. Zhafiarov, Director of Scientific Research Centre of Applied Didactics of Novosibirsk). Concluding discussions stressed the difficulties of negotiating the transition from the "old" to the "new Russia," and of heated, ongoing debates between "orthodox views" (stressing the importance of education of children as part of the collective) and "new views" (emphasizing the importance of individuality and entrepreneurial creativity, as keys to social well-being in a period of wide-ranging changes).

At stake here are notions of the sorts of human beings education should aim to create and develop. While the goal of developing entrepreneurial initiative and knowledge was foregrounded, the picture was complicated by concerns with "reviving folk art" in the schools (in order to help children develop a sense of cultural identity and continuity, perhaps especially important in a place like Bratsk) and with developing children's "concerns for very fragile nature."

Conflicts between "orthodox" and "new" perspectives were also evident in the Architecture session. The conference description noted: "Sessions will offer a retrospective analytical review of development of Siberian communities and illustrate how planners, architects and engineers have changed the focus of community development by focusing on children's facilities and 'people places.'"

Sharon Stephens

Workshops will illustrate examples of environmentally sensitive design useful in application to rebuilding Russian communities."

On a tour of Bratsk, almost exclusively a city of large-scale, high-rise buildings, our guide spoke proudly of plans to create new residential areas of single-family dwellings, symbols of "new thinking" and "progress." Questions not directly addressed in the Architecture session included what such dwellings might mean for the everyday lives of children and for local environmental quality, and whether Siberian communities might develop local alternatives to *both* Soviet collective *and* Western individual family residential traditions.

Related issues were touched upon, however, in presentations on "Traditions and architectural heritage of Eastern Siberia" (V.V. Iskakov, Chief Architect of Irkutsk Province) and on "Urban environments, livability and children: Experience of Omsk" (A. Karimov, Chief Architect of Omsk). Just how new - and potentially threatening - such concerns are in the context of the Soviet architectural heritage was suggested by the response to the presentation of Rose Marie Steinsvik (Architectural Centre of Tromsø) on "Climatic-adapted architecture." Steinsvik gave examples of place- and child-sensitive architecture in the north - for example, involving the construction of semi-climatized spaces, so that children can play "inside," while experiencing the shifting qualities of northern light and darkness, heat and cold. Her presentation elicited a heated response from an architect in St. Petersburg, who warned the audience not to forget the important expertise Russian architects have inherited from the Soviet period. Small-scale, place-sensitive, and child-oriented perspectives represent a significant challenge to large-scale, nationally centralized and collectively oriented architectural forms (as well as to the state-wide hierarchical organization of architects that is still very important in Russia).

The questions facing Russian urban planners today are many-faceted. What sorts of traditions can be drawn upon in developing new forms for new times? Is it possible to conceive of a *range* of alternatives, rather than simply a pendulum-swing from collective to individual, Soviet to Euro-American forms? What difference can children-oriented, place-specific perspectives make to architects and urban planners? And where, in this range of concerns, should planners place potentially contradictory economic and environmental concerns?

The session on Business and Tourism often seemed to have little direct connection to children. The slippage from a child/youth orientation to a more exclusive

concern with business opportunities is even evident in the conference description, which notes that workshops in this session "will focus on training for youth in business and entrepreneurship and on opportunities and regulations concerning foreign investment." Presentations included: "Tourism and development of the North" (V.P. Gukov, Institute of Economics and Management); "Siberia: A virgin land for business and tourism" (V.Y. Burov, President of Scientific Research Centre of Bratsk); "International marketing: Economic and management aspects of tourism" (L. Neal, University of Oregon; R. Brayly, University of Manitoba; D. Twynam, University of Lakehead); and "Ecotourism: Prerequisites and conditions" (V.V. Berezhnykh, Editor of Inter-Baikal Weekly; A.D. Kolikhman, Chairman of the Baikal Conductors Association). Presentations that seemed to have somewhat more to do with children included: "Training for business: Problems and prospects" (A.N. Trukhim, Russian-Asian Humanitarian University of Irkutsk) and "Winter festivals around the world as an element in the development of winter tourism business" (including discussion of how children can be brought into "winter festivals" as central participants, Svein Kristiansen, Tromsø).

One way of interpreting this session could be that an international conference on "Children of the North" was largely a pretext for the development of regional, national and international business networks and for business-oriented discussions of the psychology of tourists, ways to encourage entrepreneurial activity in the region, etc.. From another perspective, however, concerns about the economic prospects of Bratsk and other northern centers are integrally linked to considerations of "the best interests of children." In some respects, concerns about economic development constituted the background for discussions in the other three sessions, which were more explicitly linked to children.

According to the conference description, the general aim of the conference was to contribute to the "balanced development of the Northern communities" and "the all-round development of children." The question, of course, is how to find points of balance between human and economic development in a world where the chasm between the experiences of children and their parents is ever-widening; where "solutions" to environmental and health problems often seem to create new sets of problems; and where the future for which people wish to prepare their children appears ever more precarious and imperilled. In such a context, winter festivals and "eco-tourism" may well appear as promising supplements or alternatives to industrial development and may provide at least *some* of the economic resources needed for developing and realizing new forms of health care,

Sharon Stephens

education, architecture, and environmental programs aimed at furthering "the best interests" of children and future generations.

Concluding remarks and possibilities for international research collaborations

Many conference participants noted that the problems discussed in Bratsk are by no means limited to Russian children or even "Children of the North" more generally. Children around the world are disproportionately vulnerable to both environmental and social risks.

A recurrent theme at the Bratsk conference was the problem of disrupted *reproduction* - of forests, fish, human populations, political orders, educational and architectural traditions, regional and national cultures. Consideration of the situations of Russian children provides us with important comparative perspectives for exploring disruptions in physical and social reproduction in other world regions, with fundamental implications for children's bodies, minds, and social worlds. The breakup of the former Soviet Union cannot be viewed simply as an isolated historical phenomenon, but must be seen within the context of globally significant changes in economic, political and cultural structures. A challenge for researchers concerned with children's lives and futures is to explore the particularity of children's experiences and conditions in diverse world regions and social contexts, while also seeking to illuminate the complex ways they articulate and overlap.

In my discussion of the Children and Environment session, I tried to suggest some important respects in which Russian and Euro-American researchers might learn from one another. It seems to me crucial that Russian research on children's environmentally-related health problems reach a much broader international audience than it has up to now, both as a warning to other regions and because international discussions could make important contributions to improving already seriously compromised environmental quality and children's health. It also seems important that children and environment research in the former USSR not be limited to scientific assessments of children at special risk, as is largely the case now. Perspectives on children as actors and social participants have the potential for contributing to the development of truly innovative approaches and programs, which are not bound by the old frameworks and presuppositions of *either* East or West.

At present, one problem with developing international collaborations is language. Simultaneous English/Russian translations of all presentations at the Bratsk conference were provided by six translators brought in for the event from Moscow, but language barriers made free-flowing discussions very difficult. Language difficulties are also one reason Russian researchers have not published for a wide international audience. For this reason, "Childhood" (an international, interdisciplinary journal on child research, sponsored by The Norwegian Centre for Child Research) has set aside funds for translation and is expressly seeking manuscript submissions from Russia and other parts of the non-Euro-American research world.

Since returning from Bratsk, I have been in contact with "Childwatch International" (an NGO based in Oslo, aimed at promoting international connections among child researchers and policy-makers). We are exploring possibilities, together with the Moscow-based Socio-Ecological Union led by Maria Cherkasova, of organizing a "child research capacity-building conference" in the Moscow area. The aim would be to bring together Euro-American child researchers with researchers doing work on children's issues in eastern Europe and the former USSR, in order to explore special problems and questions raised in the Eastern context, to link these to child research being done elsewhere, and to contribute to "capacity building" - in the form of institutional support, network formation, and assistance in international publication. It is crucial to emphasize that "capacity building" is needed among Western researchers as well, in order for them to become more proficient in hearing and responding to what their Eastern colleagues have to tell them, rather than assuming that communication should be one-sided, from the West to "developing regions."

A crucially important topic for international exploration is the field of contradictions associated with every attempt to "balance" environment and development concerns. A focus on children opens up new possibilities for thinking about the complexities of environment and development connections. For example, theories of sustainable development have up to now taken surprisingly little cognizance of the quality of children's health, developmental possibilities and everyday life quality, but this is an area that could be very fruitfully explored by East/West collaborative research.

The Bratsk conference on "Children of the North" - in all its complexity and contradictions - reminds us once again that a focus on *children* is both a powerful

Sharon Stephens

force for mobilizing international collaborations and for moving beyond received geographical and disciplinary boundaries.

Notes

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1. Stephens, Sharon. 1994. Children and Environment: Local Worlds and Global Connections. *Childhood 2 (1/2)*:1-21.
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