Discourses of Agency and Power in Lives of Burmese Migrant Children in Tak Province, Thailand

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“There is perhaps no more powerful way of transforming human society than changing how the adults of today relate to children, the adults of tomorrow” (Johnson et al., 1998, p.xvii)

Abstract

This research aims to identify the extent to which concepts of childhood originated in the West influence the perceptions and representations of Burmese migrant children living in Thailand by non-governmental and community-based organizations working with these children. Theoretical foundation is built upon conceptions of childhood, agency and empowerment as well as on academic theories related to these concepts. Viewing children through the lens of “exported” childhood contributes to victimizing them, denying their agency and power. This approach creates vicious circle of voice deprivation, subordination and marginalization of migrant children. Using discourse analysis, the study found out the tendency to portray children in the way that highlights and exhibits their vulnerability in NGO reports, while interviewed representatives of aid and community organizations shared perceptions reflecting diversity of children’s experiences.

Keywords: migrant children, exported model of childhood, agency, power, Thailand, non-governmental organizations, community organizations
# Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 6
Research problem ..................................................................................................................... 6
Purpose and Research questions ............................................................................................ 7
Method and Selection ............................................................................................................. 8
  Procedures .......................................................................................................................... 9
Reliability and validity .......................................................................................................... 10
Methods of selection ............................................................................................................ 11
Analysis and transcribing interviews .................................................................................. 12
Ethical Considerations ......................................................................................................... 13
Study delimitations ................................................................................................................ 13
Disposition ............................................................................................................................ 14

Chapter 1: Children, agency and empowerment ...................................................................... 15
  1.1. Childhood .................................................................................................................. 16
    1.1.1 Migrant childhood and power .............................................................................. 18
  1.2 Agency ......................................................................................................................... 19
  1.3 Victimization ................................................................................................................ 21
  1.4 Empowerment ............................................................................................................ 21
  1.5 “Exported” model of childhood ................................................................................... 22
  1.6 Ecological Model of Human Development .................................................................... 23

Chapter 2: Context of migrant lives along the border ............................................................. 24
  2.1 Lives of migrants in Tak province ............................................................................... 25
  2.2 Context of migrant children’s lives in Tak province – opinions of NGO and CBO workers .... 27
  2.3 NGOs and CBOs working with migrant population in Tak province ....................... 29

Chapter 3: Perceptions and Representations of Migrant Children Living in Tak Province, Thailand ...... 32
  3.1 Childhood .................................................................................................................... 33
    3.1.1 Rational/ irrational child ...................................................................................... 33
    3.1.2 Weak/ strong ...................................................................................................... 33
    3.1.3 Public/ private ..................................................................................................... 34
  3.2 Agency ......................................................................................................................... 35
  3.3 Empowerment ............................................................................................................ 38
  3.4 Victimization .............................................................................................................. 39
Discussion and Conclusion ................................................................................................... 40
References ............................................................................................................................ 42
Appendix ............................................................................................................................... 47
Appendix 1 – Visual material ........................................................................................................... 47
Appendix 2 – Tables .......................................................................................................................... 49
Foreword

This thesis is the final point in my two-year journey towards Master’s degree. I would like to thank Centre for East- and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University for making this journey interesting, challenging and inspiring.

I want to thank Annika Pissin, my supervisor, who guided me through the process of thesis work. Her valuable advices were encouraging, and comments – helpful. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Monica Lindberg Falk, Ann Kull and Magnus Andersson who despite being busy, always found time to provide inspiring commentary on my work.

My parents have been invaluable support during these two years. They have always been there for me and were making the hardest days brighter.
Introduction

Experience of cross-border migration makes people who face it get through many challenging situations related to leaving their countries of origin, their homes, their families, and adapting to new realities of other countries. Irrespectively of the age, this experience makes a strong impact on a person’s life, but despite of the primary challenges, not always a bad one. Nevertheless aid organizations in the West tend to portray migrants as pitiful victims of migration. Migrant children are usually pictured as even more vulnerable and marginalized. This way of representing migrant children is argued to reflect distorted nature of their experiences, disregard their agency and promote stigmatization.

This study focuses on current perceptions and representations of migrant children as persons who possess agency, and investigates how agency is promoted through empowerment projects and child participation. My aim is to see how non-governmental (NGO) and community-based (CBO) organizations conceive agency of migrant children living along Thai-Burma border and how the understanding of agency is reflected in children’s representation in reports and policy recommendations. Previous studies on agency and power of Burmese migrants have been conducted only by NGO research teams, and are objects of analysis and critique in this study.

Research problem

This research is concerned with issues related to social construction of childhood and children’s agency as well as with power relations that are constructed through communication of NGOs/CBOs with migrant children. Perceptions of child’s agency are directly related to the contemporary conceptions of childhood. Debates on various conceptions of childhood are still ongoing in scholarly circles, and their diversity in its turn is rooted in cultural, socio-economic and religious contexts. On their way to empower migrant children aid organizations may use tools such as child participation in order to better understand children’s needs and rights while others do not ask children at all. This study takes the stance of childhood studies that argue for childhood as a construction of specific social, political, economic and cultural contexts (Ensor & Gozdziak, 2010: 20, based on James and Prout (1991)), which reflects a social constructivist worldview.

Creswell holds that subjective meanings that constitute social phenomena (in this case, childhood) are “formed through interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual’s lives” (Creswell, 2007:21). Even though all aspects constituting “childhood” are important, this study will mostly focus on “components” of agency
and power. This study does not aim to generalize the data about perceptions of childhood and agency to all migrant children in the world in order not to downplay the importance of context-specific socio-economic, cultural and political situation on the perceptions and representations of migrant children. It rather attempts to present the range of perceptions and representations of children and agency by the variety of NGOs (both international and local) and CBOs and draws conclusions about the role of “exported”\(^1\) notions of childhood in the context of Thailand-Burma border area.

This exported, out-of-the-context perception of childhood is commonly used in “aid imagery”\(^2\) (Burman, 2007:239) and contributes to shaping popular vision of migrant children as weak, hapless and subjects to rehabilitation and normalization. Victimizing migrant children might bring more investments to the aid organizations, NGOs and CBOs, while the distribution of these investments might not consider real needs of these children because of the deformed perception of their experiences and possibilities.

This paper represents a critique to perceiving and portraying Burmese migrant children in Thailand as vulnerable, less rational and unable to make a choice for themselves (Boyden & Ennew, 1997:59-60). This approach is based on the theories holding that the dominant contemporary conception of childhood is rooted in Western culture and thus cannot be projected on children living in different cultural and socio-economic circumstances. Seeing migrant children as victims affects their self-perception, downplays their agency and inhibits effective aid and investment, and legitimizes intervention of actors (NGOs) in social and cultural aspects of children’s lives. Empowering and giving voice to children promotes children’s agency and allows organizations to see the real needs and problems.

**Purpose and Research questions**

The purpose of this research is to understand how NGOs and CBOs and their workers perceive migrant children and their agency through the way they describe them and approach their empowerment. The purpose leads to the need to answer the following questions:

- How do non-governmental/aid workers envision and describe children they are working with?
- How are migrant children portrayed in policy-recommendations and situational reports, issued by major NGOs?

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\(^1\) Originated in the West and transmitted to other parts of the world

\(^2\) “Aid imagery” – the type of images, used by aid organizations to illustrate humanitarian issue (auth.)
• How do NGOs and CBOs perceive children’s agency and empowerment?

And more specifically:

• Are NGOs and CBOs imposing “exported” understandings of childhood on migrant children living along the Thailand-Burma border?

**Method and Selection**

This study is mainly qualitative, and even though it contains some quantitative data, it will be presented, but not analyzed. Denzin and Lincoln define qualitative research as the research that “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (2005:3). Agency and empowerment and the meanings NGO- and CBO-workers ascribe to them are the spotlight of this research. The study is based on qualitative data collected during a two-month fieldwork period in Thailand and Burma, including the border areas. During the fieldtrip Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Mae Sai and Mae Sot in Thailand, and Tachilek and Myawaddy in Burma have been visited.

To understand the perceptions of migrant children’s agency, eight semi-structured interviews have been conducted in Thailand with workers and program leaders of NGOs of different size and scope of activity, as well as with teachers and principals of community-based migrant schools and one clinic. Four out of five interviewees from NGOs are male, where two of them have American nationality, two have Thai citizenship, and one female is the citizen of Spain. Two out of three interviewees from CBOs are male and one is a female, all of them are stateless of Karen origin. Interviews constituted the primary source of data for this research. Snowballing was used to recruit new interviewees and facilitators. Fieldwork involved extensive participant observations and active involvement in daily events in NGOs, migrant schools, clinic and communities. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this fieldtrip for this research. Even though it does not include voices of children, it does include visual material like photographs depicting children’s spaces. NGO reports and policy recommendations are used as a secondary data source together with academic articles and books to provide theoretical and empirical basis of the thesis. Photographs taken on the field and other photographs (courtesy of NGOs and CBOs) as well as the notes from the interviews are also regarded as data sources for this research.

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3 The biggest ethnic minority group of Burmese population
Richards and Morse hold that research question justifies the choice of the method, and the method corresponds to the most suitable data types. (2007:32,34). The questions that this research is asking are to be answered by being studied through the case study approach, where migrant children living in Tak province situated along Thailand-Burma border are chosen as the case. Case study appears to be the most suitable methodological framework due to several reasons.

First, even though there is some common experience that all migrant children face, it is impractical to generalize the findings of this study to other migrant communities outside Thailand, because they have their own specific factors that shape the nature of their experience (from climate to political situation). Case study serves best to test the general ideas of childhood, empowerment and agency in specific context of Thai-Burmese border and cannot be considered as a representative sample of all migrant population (Yin, 2003:10). Second, case studies tend to answer “how” and “why” questions, for instance, “How NGOs and CBOs view empowerment of migrant children?” and “What are the reasons (why) they choose to empower children in a certain way?” (through education, participation in leadership trainings) (ibid., p.22). And third, using case study provides the opportunity to perform more holistic analysis of perception and representation of children through using more data sources – interviews, participant observation, reports and policy recommendations as well as visual material (Creswell, 2007: 75).

**Procedures**

The first step in conducting fieldwork was obtaining initial contacts and schedule first interviews. Even though primary network started to emerge before going to the field, I experienced difficulties in pursuing new respondents from the very beginning. The hurdle on my way to find people to interview was bolstered by sensitivity of the topic of the research and difficulty to reach the “right” people such as project leaders and policy facilitators who were working with migrant children. Building the initial network helped me to get access to such places as migrant children’s living spaces, schools, playgrounds, hospitals and work sites.

All interviews and participant observation were conducted during February and March 2012. Interviews were predominantly conducted at the offices of organizations whose workers were interviewed. All interviews were conducted in English, and each one of them started with obtaining informed consent, providing information about the study and confirming the confidentiality in order to protect the identity of respondents. Each interview lasted 40-60 minutes and was recorded on a digital recorder.
All respondents were asked to explain how they envision migrant children they are working with, and describe these children’s lives and hurdles. They were also asked to define what empowerment means for them and how their organization approaches empowerment. NGO workers were asked about the problems in children’s lives their organization aims to address. Questions about children’s agency were asked indirectly by inviting respondents to characterize children’s willingness and capability to make choices for their future and the role that organization plays in facilitating these choices. Apart from interview data photographs taken during the fieldwork or obtained from organizations are enclosed to Appendix to complement reader’s understanding of life of migrants along Thai-Burma border.

**Reliability and validity**

Reliability and validity are essential parts of social research because they help to construct objectivity and credibility of the study (Peräkylä, 2004: 283). Kirk and Miller hold that reliability in social science research can be understood as the ability to obtain the same results of the study once again by following the same procedures (1986: 69). Recordings of the conducted interviews are available in case of my study and can be accessed any time to verify the results. Seven audio files are accessible and notes from eight formal and two informal interviews are at my disposal and can be recalled when necessary. Policy and project papers used as a data source can be provided upon request.

Validity is related as the appropriateness of the object of research to the ways this object is studied (Kirk & Miller, 1986: 69). There are several factors that help to construct validity in this study. First of all, in order to understand how migrant children’s agency and empowerment are perceived by NGO and CBO workers, the respondents for the interviews were selected in order to represent the whole range of various organizations and their approaches. CBOs are selected to represent local organizations that might escape the influence of “exported” notion of childhood. Thus, the diversity of respondents’ backgrounds works to assure more inclusive sample. Second, generalizability of the results of the study is another brick helping to construct the validity. Overall the understanding of a child and child’s agency is very context-specific (for example they are very different for children who migrated from Burma to Thailand than for those who migrated from Europe to USA). That is why the immediate conclusions about NGO and CBO workers’ understanding and representation of migrant children’s experiences cannot be generalized to other contexts. Nevertheless, the approaches of these organizations to migrant children, such as victimization approach, can be also found in other cases where organizations
apply Western perception of childhood to the children living within the contexts that vary significantly from those of Western children.

**Methods of selection**

Creswell reviews several approaches to purposeful sampling that are discussed in academic literature (2007). In this study I applied purposeful sampling to choosing the site of fieldwork and participants.

Tak province along the Thailand-Burma border has been chosen as the case for this study for several reasons. First of all, the border between these two states is one of the biggest land borders in South-East Asia, comprises 1800 km (Brees, 2008:382), and is populated by over 140,000 Burmese living in refugee camps and over 1,5 million living the lives of illegal migrants along the border (IOM Situation Report, p.70). Thereby about 80% of all migrants do not have legal status and legal rights. Migration through Thai-Burma border have been triggered in 1980s by rapid economic development and consequent labor shortage in Thailand, but fleeing violence and disastrous economic conditions have been and still remains another major reason for migration (Brees, 2008: 382). Another regard that made this part of the country interesting to study for me is that the border crossing Myawaddy-Mae Sot, Tak stays one of the biggest out- and immigration hubs in the region. Human rights as well as labor- and migration-focused organizations identified situation with children’s rights violations such as economic exploitation, trafficking and sexual trade as troubled and insecure (IOM Situation Report, p.69), which attracted hundreds of NGOs and CBOs to start their work with children on the border. One can find big international organizations such as United Nations (UN) agencies offices, Relief International as well as smaller-scale international NGOs (Thailand-Burma Border Consortium – TBBC), local NGOs (Social Action for Women – SAW) and a vast number of CBOs such as community boarding schools and migrant clinics. There are also a number of faith-based NGOs such as Combasio and Jesuit Refugee Service International (JRSI) and Buddhist monasteries that are involved in supporting local community. Such a diversity of organizations involved in assisting to migrant population would promise the assortment of approaches to empowerment and agency. The last reason is that I intended to see if experiences of Burmese migrant children presented in organization’s reports are based on communication that involves child participation and focuses on making children’s voices heard rather than representation of adults’ perceptions of children’s lives. In other words, my interest is to understand the ways of empowerment of these children as reflections of organizations’ envisioning of migrant childhood.
The choice of participants (organizations) was motivated by the presupposed differences in their approaches to children and empowerment (Cresswell, 2007: 126). After conducting first interviews and building the initial contacts network I started to use snowballing method⁴ to select candidates that will diversify my research findings. As a result, the variety of respondents for this study is represented by: one official and one unofficial interview with UN agency worker, one official and one unofficial interview with employees of large international NGO, one official interview with religious international NGO and one official interview with Thai developmental NGO as well as official interviews with local migrant school founder, one foreign and one Burmese teacher and one manager of migrant clinic. It was difficult to attain equal gender representation of respondents, and in six cases out of eight my respondents are male. Ethnicity of respondents was partially considered to achieve equal representation of Burmese and Western perspectives.

**Analysis and transcribing interviews**

Creswell addresses qualitative data analysis process as “moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (2007: 150). After the data has been sorted out and interviews partially transcribed (only the parts that has been related as the most relevant to this study), the main codes, themes and categories were distinguished. Each of the categories (Western models of childhood/ non-Western) related the themes (victimization/ agency/ other) to the codes – the words and phrases that represent the approaches of NGOs and CBOs to migrant children. All codes, themes and categories are matched in the table (can be found in Appendix) with the NGO/CBO they are representative of. The goal is to understand how “exported” models of childhood find their manifestations in international/local NGO/CBO perceptions of migrant children. After matching the codes, themes and categories to NGOs/CBOs, the conclusions on the role of agency and particular understandings of migrant childhoods in Thailand are made. The same procedures of identifying, describing, matching and finally explaining are applied to analysis of the project reports. In both cases both “prefigured” codes are used in conjunction with “emergent” ones (ibid., p. 152) in order to keep the research focused on the categories studied. Analytic generalizations (Yin, 2003:32-33) are made in conclusion part.

All interviews are analyzed by employing discourse analysis as a methodological tool. Defined by Foucault and Parker, discourse is a “textual system, or narrative, that constitutes objects and subjects” (Francis, 2006:300). Discourse analysis is the type of conversation analysis that suits

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⁴ “a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research” (Bryman 2008: 424)
for examination of semi-structured interview because it focuses on determining the lexicon choice of one of the interview’s participants. In the context of this study when we look through social constructivist lens discourse analysis aids to study how migrant childhood and agency are “constructed” by NGO/CBO workers. Potter emphasizes that discourse analysis is not only about the lexicon used, but is about “identities, category systems, metaphors” (2007: 205). Thus, codes, themes and categories will be identified according to the discourse they are related to. For example, recognizing children’s vulnerability (using the words – vulnerable, sensitive and so on) by itself does not mean that they are victimized. But the context surrounding the words completes the picture and creates the discourse. Policies and situational reports are also to be analyzed using the tools of discourse analysis.

It is important to note, that all interviews have been conducted in English, even though the official languages in many NGO headquarters and CBOs are Thai and Karen/Burmese. English is the language of many policy papers and project descriptions, issued by major NGOs.

**Ethical Considerations**

As any qualitative researcher I faced several ethical issues on the field. First of all I faced with the issue of self-positioning as a researcher. I always introduced myself as a student researcher from Lund University, what helped me to avoid confusion and misrepresentation. Second, my priority is to keep my informants protected and well-informed, thus obtaining informed consent, making sure participation is voluntary and describing the purposes and sensitivity of this research was my first introduction before each formal and informal interview (present on the records). The anonymity of each respondent is protected by assuring that none of the real names is disclosed, but the alias such as Respondent A is used in the text (Creswell, 2007: 141).

Another ethical issue is related to taking photographs. Each photo presenting any person and private property is taken after obtaining oral agreement from the subject depicted. Alternatively, photos are taken from official published reports or provided by interviewed NGO/CBO. No child was interviewed during the fieldwork due to ethical guidelines (The Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, 2003).

**Study delimitations**

Since this study was constrained in time and volume, there are some limitations that it is essential to mention.
First of all, even though this research is concerned with children’s voices and representation, I have chosen not to interview children for this research due to several reasons. Primary reason is that the topic is too sensitive, which poses significant responsibility to correctly reflect what children really want to say. I believe that there should be a special training for conducting participatory research with children, which I do not have. Another reason is that I decided to focus on NGO and CBO representations of migrant children, and voices of the workers might be more fundamental than voices of children themselves.

Another delimitation is related to amount of academic sources necessary for holistic understanding of what is childhood (including anatomical and psychiatric literature), but it was naturally impossible to take into consideration in this research due to its format and size.

Refugee and internally-displaced children (IDC) were deliberately excluded from the focus of this research since the circumstances of their migration are unique and vary significantly from other legal and illegal migrants living in Thailand. This research focuses mainly on stateless Burmese children, who fled their country with or without their families and are living outside of the refugee camps on the territory of the Kingdom of Thailand.

And lastly, this research might appear incomplete without presenting “Asian” or “Burmese” notions of childhood. Moreover, it uses “Western” definitions of agency and empowerment, while applying them towards non-Western environment. In this research the focus is concentrated on originally Western conceptions due to unavailability of alternative academically-trustworthy local sources dedicated to perceptions of children as well as concepts related to children and power derived from the local context. It does not deprive this study of its reliability, but concentrates on the shortcomings of “exporting” Western understanding of childhood to the context of Burmese migrant children in Thailand.

It is important to note that in order to narrow the focus of this research down, all individuals from 0 to 18 years old are considered as “children”. More distinction could have been done by including such categories as “youth” or “adolescence”, but I have chosen to use the broad definition in order to follow the logic of a legal notion of a child, which is used in reports and policy-making.

**Disposition**

This study consists of the three chapters.
Chapter 1 discusses the major theoretical conceptions of childhood, the “exported” model of childhood, the aspects of agency and power.

Chapter 2 focuses on the situation of migrant children who are living in Thailand – their problems and other issues as presented in academic literature and described by NGO and CBO workers. Second part of this chapter is dedicated to examining the variety and role of NGOs and CBOs in the work with migrant children in Thailand.

And finally, in Chapter 3 analysis of the perception and representation of Burmese migrant children by NGO/CBO workers based on empirical data is conducted.

The following conclusion aims to present the answers to the questions asked in this thesis and present analytical generalizations about the topic.

Chapter 1: Children, agency and empowerment

I decided to dedicate the whole chapter to presenting discussions on the concepts of childhood and agency because only establishing connections between the origins of these concepts and their applications will help to fully understand why it’s important to study the way “adults of today relate to children, adults of tomorrow” (Johnson et al., 1998, p.xvii).

This study draws on several propositions that were tested on the field. The first one holds that victimization discourse is still widespread among NGOs and CBOs. This hypothesis is based on overseeing the literature on migrant children from all over the world (Byant (2005) Christopoulou and de Leeuw (2008), Caouette (1999)) as well as literature on nature and characteristics of childhood (Brocklehurst (2006), Ensor and Gozdziak (2010), Montgomery (2010)). The second proposition assumes that victimization approach is related to “exported” notion of childhood. Ansell relates to Apollonian and Dionysian perceptions of childhood, that originated in the West about four centuries ago, when children are perceived as distanced from “public” spaces, seldom given a voice, objects to be re-educated to become adults (2008:12). And the third regards that there is a link between understanding of children’s agency and the ways of empowerment employed by NGOs and CBOs.

Concepts of childhood, agency, paternalism, empowerment, victimization and power constitute the conceptual foundation of this thesis. The theoretical framework is centered on the Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as well as “exported childhood” model (Burman, 2007, Ansell, 2008).
1.1. Childhood

Esnor and Gozdziak argue that migrant children should be primarily addressed as children (2010: 17). There are several reasons for me to incorporate this stance into my thesis. First of all, approaching them as children brings another perspective on diversity of childhood experiences and doesn’t promote homogenization and equal treatment of all children out there. Another reason is that by bringing migratory circumstances as the primary factor in dealing with migrant children it is easy to concentrate on traumatic and negative experiences and start victimizing them. In this part of the chapter the conceptions of childhood will be discussed in order to demonstrate their origins and their validity in modern day context of Thailand-Burma border.

There is no single concept of childhood, but rather a set of constantly changing attributes, that are ascribed to childhood and children in different geographical, cultural, socio-political and historical contexts. Conceptualization of childhood as a distinct stage of person’s development started to be formed only in 15th century in Europe – and prior to this time children were treated equally to adults immediately after passing stage of physical dependence (Ariès, 1962). Such attributes as fragility and lack of rationality appeared in letters and medical tractates earlier (Montgomery, 2010:52). Then, with the introduction of an institutional educational system children were distanced from adults within a separate sphere. Ideas and concepts of childhood originated at the same time were triggered by pedagogical education and increased role of the church in the West (Ansell, 2008:8). Childhood has been studied from various perspectives – from anatomical, psychological, social and even economic. Nevertheless, conception of childhood resulted in creation of multiple interpretations of notion of childhood throughout the world. This variation in turn arises from cultural and religious backgrounds, dominating political and socio-economic circumstances, but may also differ even within one society (ibid.,21). Heather Montgomery talks about “multiplicity of childhoods”, because what is attributed to “normal” childhood in the West might be perceived as “immature” and “unnecessary” in the countries with different societal structures (Montgomery, 2010:50).

In his book “Children, Youth and Development” Ansell summarizes two most popular Medieval conceptions of childhood (2005:10-13), that can promote our understanding of the origin of debates on children’s agency and power.

Dionysian conception argued to be dominating understanding of childhood in the West prior to the 20th century. According to it children are seen as “little devils” who need moral guidance (Ansell, 2005:11). The ideas of children’s unstable morals resulted in promotion of separation of
children’s and “adult” places, due to the belief that these places may further corrupt them. Boyden sees the signs of trying to keep children away from “pollution” of adult world in modern-day Third World children policies (Boyden in Ansell, 2005:11). Educational and religious institutions were playing important role in maintaining children’s morals and contributed to keeping children in their own “children’s” spaces.

Apollonian conception of the child represents the contrary point of view, where child is seen as an innocent and pure creation (Ansell, 2005:11). Believed to be dominating conception of childhood in modern Western societies Apollonian view further argues for separation of children’s and adults’ spaces in order to preserve innocence and natural naiveté inherent to children. For example Ariès argues: “Children neither work nor play alongside adults; they do not participate in the adult world of law and politics. Their world is innocent where the adult world is knowing…” (1962: 37). The major jeopardizers of childhood are the factors that promote loosing innocence – sexual contacts (physical) and war (moral). Children affected by war or any kind of conflict are considered as victims of adult world (Montgomery, 2010: 100), but despite adult world is kept responsible for making decisions for children, provide their rights and freedoms.

Ansell also discusses the theories of childhood such as developmental psychology, educational theories and other theories that emerged within anthropology, geography and sociology. Nevertheless these theories were only addressing children from their own perspectives, without concentrating on diverse experiences and developments of childhood (Ansell, 2005:15).

Ansell argues that there are several misconceptions that resulted in universalization of meaning of childhood. First is that childhood is seen as a natural state (Ansell, 2005:13). Seeing childhood as a ubiquitous stage on the way to “becoming” an adult is representative of still widespread academic discourse (Holt & Holloway, 2006:155). Holloway and Valentine and Ansell hold that approaching childhood this way is a powerful social construction (Holloway & Valentine, 2000: 765) that influence development policies (Ansell, 2005: 13) as well as popular discourse. John Whiting was the first anthropologist who has proven that childhood is not universalistic, and is in fact determined by cultural, social and other factors along with biological (Montgomery, 2010: 28).

Second misconception briefly mentioned above is attributed innocence. Innocence has been incorporated into a modern day vision of childhood as an inherent attribute of the latter. It has also being preserved by keeping children in “their” places and teaching them to avoid
communicating to strangers. Tendency to overprotect children from adult world brought the opposite results – they became more vulnerable to the “adult” enemies constructed for them by adults (Aitken, 2001: 124), and further reflects seeing children as “incomplete” adults. Some authors see it as a reflection of paternalistic power relationships that dominate in many societies (Kesby, Chizororo etc.). Seeing child as pure and innocent as well as attempts to protect children from losing ascribed virtues often results in neglecting children’s ability to care about themselves and contributes to downplaying their agency. Moreover, perception of children’s innocence and natural status also reflects gendered dichotomy of power (natural, private, weak – feminine, strong, public, cultural – male). Again, ascribing gendered characteristics to children found its expression in the fact that aid agencies choose to picture girls as representations of their activities (Burman, 1995:24).

1.1.1 Migrant childhood and power

The popular imagery and verbal portrayal of migrant children usually implies the pictures of hapless, sick and weak of hard work hungry children. Making abstract “child in adversity” representing the whole migrant children population helps to attract donations and “construct” or “depict” an “enemy” (poverty, hunger, migration) to fight via various campaigns and projects of both governmental and non-governmental organizations (Higonnet, 1998). Burman argues, that such paternalism reflects the colonial dichotomy of “adult” North versus “infant” South, where the former has enough knowledge and power to help the latter (2007: 241). Similar rhetoric is often representative of many child rights activists (ibid.) and foreign NGOs.

This dichotomy contributes to construction of power relations, where the rational and powerful “adult” represented by NGO worker, donor or governmental official demonstrates the power to “save” a helpless child. This dichotomy further finds its expression in the rhetoric of aid, humanitarian and missionary actors to shorten or erase the hiatus that separates “them” from “us” 5. This hiatus, represented by amount of money one earns, gender and age, health status and habitat is the foundation upon which victimization and subordination are built. These factors that contribute to vulnerability, when being placed on the focus are also contributing to “othering” of migrant children. Also, it legitimizes interventions of NGOs, CBOs and other actors in order to reduce the hiatus, “normalize” the situation but neglect the diversity. Burman links this paternalism to colonial legacy of what Edward Said named orientalism (2007:241).

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5 for example in Millennium Development Goals rhetoric “South” is represented as “people whose income is less than $1 per day”, girls and women, under-fives, children orphaned with AIDS, slum dwellers etc. (UN, Millennium Development Goals)
Various perceptions of childhood are instilled and promoted by media, academia and humanitarian sector. It is argued in this research that it’s important to study these perceptions in order to understand specific needs of children in specific contexts.

1.2 Agency

The apprehension of children’s agency is related to perceptions of childhood. Agency has been perceived differently throughout different history periods in different parts of the world. In the West a child is still mostly perceived as an agent only in his/her own child’s world, and not in the world of adults, which implies that spheres of politics, hard work, sexual life and war are deemed “unsuitable” for children (Brocklehurst, 2006:21). Similarly, children are often perceived as objects rather than subjects in policy papers, which deprives them of their voice and downgrades their agency (ibid.). This approach legitimizes interference, which often implies no children’s consent.

Removing children from public arenas of adult world resulted in the decreased value of child’s voice. Adults got used to decide for themselves and for their children all the more so because governmental and law system promoted paternalism of this sort by creating the vertical, where state and family are responsible for children and are the carriers of their voice.

Developmental psychology was initially preoccupied by studying issues related to children’s agency. Early developmental psychological research (for instance Piaget) was focusing on stages within childhood – every stage represented the progress on the way from purely emotional state towards rationality (Ansell, 2005: 16). Thus, from this discipline’s point of view, childhood is constructed as a stage of becoming an adult or “incomplete adulthood”. This ascribed incompleteness of childhood is argued to be another Western concept (ibid.) that ignores diversity of factors influencing child’s development and does not address children as agents.

Lev Vygotsky offered an alternative perspective on children’s role in society. He argued that they are learning and adapting from the society rather than just growing into it (Ansell, 2005:17). Vygotsky assigned special importance to the contexts children are learning from and the way children apply learned skills to the new contexts (ibid.). Recognition of children’s ability to reconstruct their own realities by learning is a big contribution towards understanding children’s agency in academia.

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6 look for example on the formulations of United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, where nearly every Article proclaims adults as actors and thus making children the passive recipients of “rights” and “freedoms”
Broadening of the perspective in studying children and their agency happened at the end of the 20th century, which resulted in a new approach called new social studies of childhood (Ansell, 2005: 20-21). According to this approach, children can be seen as: (1) “tribal”, (2) integral part of wider society and (3) minority group that is usually discriminated (ibid.).

Studying children as “tribal” assumes that they’re equally worth studying as adults and they are “beings” rather than “incomplete becomings” (Ansell, 2005: 21-22). They manage to establish social interaction with each other and with adults and are competent to their own degree. Thus, they can be recognized as the agents of their own worlds.

There is still lack of understanding in academia that children should be studied within the wider society context. While Lev Vygotsky had studied how children were appropriating society from developmental psychology perspective, it is important to present various aspects of children’s socialization within societies and the ways they themselves shape their societies (Montgomery, 2010: 6).

Studying children as a minority accentuates their marginalized position, promotes their subordination and downplays their agency. In fact, studying children as minority often leads to victimization and further “othering” and misinterpretation of children’s real experiences.

While the perceptions of children and childhoods, children’s agency and experiences of migration have constantly being revisited and transformed by academics, the variety of NGO and CBO workers and teachers bring their understanding of childhood from the West to the Third World. With the expansion of non-governmental sector and humanitarian aid more and more people get access to migrant children and all of them have certain vision of these children – vision based on their cultural and socio-economic background and on the vision of NGO/CBO they’re working for. Since visions of workers and organizations are of big diversity, the approaches they undertake to work with children are accordingly various as well. Nevertheless, globalization and expansion of non-governmental and humanitarian sectors bear the fruits of looking at children from essentialist, homogenizing and universalistic positions, when Western perceptions of childhood are applied to children of other backgrounds (Ansell, 2008: 13). There are two approaches that accentuated in the previous studies - when migrant children (and other children in difficult situations) are looked upon as victims (victimization approach) and agency approach. The “victimization approach” emerged among scholars and NGOs at the earlier

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7 The tendency to focus on traumatic experiences of children, their challenges and lagging from what is perceived as a norm in a given context.
period of working with migrants. For example, initially most studies on migrant children in Thailand were dedicated to child trafficking (Bryant, 2005:20). Nowadays there are mostly migrant advocacy groups as well as child welfare community that focus on traumatic and disturbing side of migrant lives, while academic circles conduct studying migrant experiences in their variance (Ensor & Gozdziak, 2010: 5). Ensor and Gozdziak argue that the visions and approaches undertaken towards these children make a great impact on how migrant children are perceived in the society (ibid.).

1.3 Victimization

Hall and Montgomery provide spectacular example how victimizing children misrepresents their real experiences – when young prostitutes in Thailand are portrayed as victims of child abuse and are viewed with sympathy in the West (2000:13). Thus, victimizing children may serve the purposes of attracting more funds to non-governmental and aid sector, but it ignores and even violates children’s agency. In addition to prescribing gendered qualities, children are also used as a generalized entity associated with the Third World and its plight. Holland asserts: “… the whole of the Third World are among those who stand in a childish relation to the exercise of power” (2004:148).

Perceiving and representing migrant children as victims also promotes incomplete and misinterpreted picture for those Western NGOs and their partners who design policies and projects targeting these children. Holland holds that “the western public has become familiar with an imagery of extremity at the expense of context, and the wrenching of emotion at the expense of understanding” (2004:151). These words verbalize the valuable reason why context of diverse children’s experiences and emotions should not be ignored. Only when perceived and presented without distortions they are able to convey the real needs of the children to those who design policies and constructs the popular discourse.

1.4 Empowerment

Empowerment carries multiple notions. From one point of view it can be defined as “giving power to the children by allowing them the chance to be heard (Grover, 2004: 85), while in academic context participatory research can represent a way to switch focus from academics to children (Cahill, 2004: 283). The diversity of understanding of what constitutes power gave rise to multiple interpretations and approaches to empowerment. Following the logic of these definitions, power is viewed as a commodity that can be transferred from adult to a child. Thus, by embodying power in different guises, weak recipients are supposed to be able to stop being
powerless. Empowerment – the process of “transfer of power” promotes recipients’ agency because it usually involves occupation of recipient in certain activities.

While the first definition of empowerment emphasizes adult who is “giving” and “allowing a chance” to be heard, the rhetoric of second one prioritizes children’s voice above adults’ voices. This academic perception of empowerment is a part of a current debate on child participation as a way of empowerment (Uprichard, 2010). Other approaches apart from child participation, that are more common in humanitarian, advocacy and social spheres, are empowerment through education, empowerment through children’s rights and empowerment through development and so on. In this research project we study the diversity of approaches to empowerment undertaken by NGOs and CBOs working with migrant children in Thailand.

Some major NGOs working with migrant children all around the world such as UNICEF, Save the Children or Relief International are able to influence decisions made on governmental level through their policy-recommendations that often form the basis of governmental policies and documents of legal power. Thus, there is another aspect where the perception of these children affects their lives. Within academia the possibilities to focus on various sides of migrant experiences and emerging popularity of active participatory and rights-based approaches provided more space for people who represent children and identify their main problems to switch focus from negative and traumatic experiences towards other, more positive sides of children’s lives. Mainly big non-governmental organizations adopted approach of empowerment through participation in their work with migrant children and designing policy-recommendations. But the recognition of children as equal partners in research did not happen overnight. The process of acknowledging the benefits of child participation is still ongoing due to transforming perceptions of children and childhood (Uprichard, 2010:10). Nevertheless, it is important for non-governmental employees and policy-makers to have the picture of children, developed through understanding the “context within which child resides” (James et al, 1998:10)

1.5 “Exported” model of childhood

Diversity of cultural backgrounds of actors can bring bigger diversity of their understandings of childhood and agency. Nicola Ansell and Erica Burman discuss so-called “exported model of childhood” (Ansell, 2008; Burman, 1994). Migration, missionary activity and colonization triggered the transmission of Western ideas about childhood to another parts of the world, while expansion of the NGO sector and international organizations further promoted its instilment in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Ansell, 2008: 23). This exported model is based on Western
values and does not take into consideration the diversity of childhood experiences around the world. These values laid the foundation of many “universal” principles such as children’s rights and thus became an unquestionable norm which influences popular perceptions of what childhood ought to be all around the globe. This homogenization of childhood experiences created a “template” of childhood, into which most of the world children are not able to fit it and are instead considered as victims, missing out their childhoods. The rhetoric used by UN and many other international organizations at the turn of 21st century is an example of this approach; and indicated the polarity of childhoods in the North – where children develop, and the South – where they strive for survival (Burman, 1994: 242).

Model of childhood “exported” from the global North implies that children are passive, vulnerable, and are the responsibility of their families (Ansell, 2008: 35). This model, that downplays the role of child’s agency laid the foundation of many policies and influenced lives of children through legislative documents and NGO projects, while it stays blind to working children, children who are the main family income contributors, children who look after their siblings, street children, independent child migrants and other situations where children act as active actors responsible for themselves and often for others. Thus, treating these children as passive victims does not reflect their reality. By playing down their agency the power relations misrepresenting their agency reflect colonial paternalism, where the distorted assertions of locals’ identities legitimized intervention in cultural and social relations of their societies.

To sum up, global model of childhood is based on the features that were discussed above – on (1) assuming natural being of childhood as irrational and underdeveloped contrastingly to adulthood, (2) viewing children as innocent, weak and passive and (3) considering normal only the standardized and phase-based childhood, where all the rest considered as deviant.

### 1.6 Ecological Model of Human Development

Ecological model of human development that has been developed by developmental psychologist Ulie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 elaborates on the influence of the setting on child’s development. Bronfenbrenner’s model distinguishes ecosystems from micro- to macro-level that can be visualized as “Russian doll” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994:39). From his/her birth child experience contacts with immediate ecosystem, that is usually limited to home and few relatives. While growing, the child’s ecosystem includes more and more contacts of different levels, and develops through contacts of mesosystem to exosystem (when child is affected by interaction of several ecosystems for example school and friends). The macrosystem represents the outer
“layer” of child’s environment – culture, religion, country, and even climate – and includes factors that indirectly influence child’s development. One of the main propositions of the author is that human development is happening via “complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994: 38).

In this study the ecological model of human development is used to demonstrate the importance of interactions between migrant children and NGO/CBO workers on several levels. The immediate interaction (micro-level) of NGO/CBO worker with children is based on the former’s perception of children and their agency, which create certain power relations which may position a child as weak or strong, and influence his/her perception of agency. Communication on the macro-level involves reflection of NGO’s/CBO’s perceptions of children in reports and policy-recommendations, which further influence children’s lives through the outcomes of these policies. It is worth noting that it is generally impossible to study all interactions of every level that might influence child’s agency. Nevertheless, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model reflects interconnectedness of micro- and macro-levels of interaction, where parents’ or other relatives’ perceptions usually are influenced by cultural/religious/popular and some other discourses. This interconnectedness promotes the significance of studying interpersonal communications as tools for discourse changes. In the context of this study it can be exemplified in situation when Western teachers in Burmese migrant schools or UK-based NGO write policy-recommendations for Thai government addressing Burmese children.

**Chapter 2: Context of migrant lives along the border**

Thailand became refuge to about one to two million people who fled Burma (Inge, 2008b:5). There is no reliable statistics on their age and gender composition, since most of them crossed the border illegally and became stateless. There are several hundred non-governmental and community-based organizations which serve the migrant populations and are able to influence migrant children’s lives and public opinion about them. It is important to examine the ways these NGOs and CBOs are viewing children’s agency, how they approach empowerment and how do they represent migrant children in their projects and policy recommendations, because it can make the aid of these organizations more effective while promoting children’s agency and ability to change their socio-economic situation in the future.

This chapter focuses on presenting the current situation for migrant workers including children in Tak province, Thailand. In the beginning of this chapter the data about situation of migrant living
along the border is obtained mostly from NGO reports and academic literature. This information is further complemented by opinions of my respondents. The finishing part of the chapter presents the summary about NGOs and CBOs operating in Tak province and whose activities target migrant children.

2.1 Lives of migrants in Tak province

The biggest numbers of migrants from Burma come to Thailand through Tak province. The population of Tak is estimated to be 150,000-250,000 people which does not include unknown number of unregistered migrants (IRC, 2011:6). This amount also does not include the population of two refugee camps situated in the province along the border with Burma. Mostly migrants who come to Thailand through Tak province are Karen people who do not speak Thai language, which creates initial and quite significant barrier for the quality of their life in Thailand.

Children constitute approximately 10% of migrant population in Tak province (CPPCR, 2009:31). Children are arriving to Tak province with their families using several ways. Some families come as economic migrants and they stay longer than their documents allow them, and after some time lose their legal status. Another group comes illegally by using the help of “brokers”, or crossing Moei river using the boats or car tires (Picture 1 in Appendix). One out of four migrants interviewed by ARCM and World Vision didn’t pass checkpoints on their way to Thailand (Chantavanich et al, 2005:37). There are some children who came on their own without their family.

Mostly all adult migrants in Tak province are occupied in industrial, agricultural, construction or service jobs (CPPCR, 2009:12). Due to low literacy rates and poor legal status migrants have to take jobs that are classified as “3D” – dirty, dangerous, demeaning, while receiving insufficient pay and having low security (ibid.). Children often take part in contributing to family income by working part-time or full-time selling goods on the streets, cleaning the houses or working at the factories. Even though according to the Thai law it is illegal for persons under 15 to take a job, and persons 15-18 years old to be occupied in certain activities (Chantavanich et al, 2005:36), as many as 29% of children in the study undertaken by Committee for Promotion and Protection of Children’s Rights reported to be working and contributing to family income. 36% of children

8 “Brokers” or “carriers” facilitate illegal border-crossing for a fee
9 River forms the natural border between Thailand and Burma
10 ARCM – Asian Research Center for Migration at Chulalongkorn University, World Vision – international umbrella organization for faith-based NGOs
reported to help their parents at home and with housework (ibid., 16). Children occupied in factories or in service\textsuperscript{11} are regarded to have poor working conditions, while some of them become involved in sex industry (ibid., 36). That’s what project manager of big international NGO working specifically with migrant children (Respondent A) says about their conditions:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The conditions of their families are more serious than that of other children, because they have to move from one to another country with their family, or sometimes they are forced to move from their home to work, because the economic condition in their family – is not enough income, so they have to leave school and start working}.
\end{quote}

Due to the fact that most of Burmese migrants in Thailand are stateless, it is harder for them to get access to the main services and protection. Reports inform about difficulties in accessing educational and health services and juvenile protection mechanisms (CPPCR, 2009; IRC, 2011). In Mae Sot according to migrants themselves there are up to 70 schools for migrant children with additional number of Thai schools, where migrant children can also enroll\textsuperscript{12}. Nevertheless, only registered migrant children were able to enroll in Thai schools\textsuperscript{13}. Chantavanich et al. report that during the Second Amnesty Policy campaign in 2005 only 13,637 out of registered 63,000 Burmese children entered Thai schools (2005: 73). Unregistered children prefer to join unofficial schools (learning centers) set up by community, international NGOs and international donors. Education provided in these schools is not recognized by Thai or Burmese governments, because the curriculum is different and most of the teachers did not undergo pedagogical training certified by one or another side. Recently Thai government cooperated with Burmese Migrant Workers Education Center\textsuperscript{14} and started the process of certification and recognition of migrant schools (BMWEC). Drop-out rates and percentage of children not attending schools are also reported to be high – about a half of all children are not enrolled in studies (CPPCR, 2009). The main barriers for children to continue schooling are language barriers, economic hardships, need to help their parents at home or at work, sickness of the parents, not seeing the purpose of studying.

Health services are also wired primarily for registered migrants (NHRCT, 2009:8). In order to get access they have to purchase an insurance card, which is additional financial burden for them. Moreover, due to the lack of awareness about the benefits of insurance, rights and language

\textsuperscript{11} In average 15-17 years old, but some children may be as young as 4-5 (CPPCR, 2009:12)
\textsuperscript{12} Information obtained during unofficial interviews
\textsuperscript{13} Children, who have undergone the registration process in Thailand within Thai government Amnesty Campaigns (1996-2005). Registration campaigns were aiming at providing more protection and services to migrant population.
\textsuperscript{14} \url{http://www.bmwec.org/}
barrier, that migrants face, not all of them benefit from purchasing it (ibid.). Yet the unconditioned benefits of insurance include regular health checks and tests that help maintaining health and include certain types of treatments. Unregistered migrants also have access to non-governmental health-care providers such as Mae Tao clinic, which was created on the basis of community development by Cynthia Maung\textsuperscript{15}, provides immunization, maternal, surgical, stomatological and other health services free of charge\textsuperscript{16}. Even though Mae Tao clinic is famous even outside of Thailand, the lack of awareness about the services and fear of being caught by Thai immigration officials leave many migrants’ health conditions unattended.

The public image of a migrant worker in Thailand is not nearly favorable. The history of confrontation between two countries that extend back over 300 years is exacerbated by negative characteristics such as “unlawful”, “dangerous” and “fearful aliens” in Thai press (Fowlie, 2008 and Aung, 2008). This attitude though stays blind towards the economic contribution Burmese migrant workers brought to Thailand. International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that by April 2008 the economic activities of migrant workers generated about 6\% of GDP of Thailand (Burma Human Rights Yearbook 2008: 978). The negative public image resulted in a lack of communication and integration of Burmese diaspora in canvas of Thai everyday lives. When asked in informal chat, all of my Burmese conversational partners during informal interviews declared that they are having hard times living in atmosphere of hostility of Thai population and that they’re hoping to come back to Burma when political situation improves.

### 2.2 Context of migrant children’s lives in Tak province – opinions of NGO and CBO workers

This part of the chapter is based on information obtained from my respondents during interviews. The citations provided below are chosen as the most representative of the situations discussed.

Almost all my respondents highlighted difficult financial situation that migrant children suffer from. While economic factor is one of the push factors for Burmese people to leave their country for good, it is also the attribute that is ascribed to their lives upon arrival to Thailand. Living on subsistence-level affects the long-term choices of migrant families, such as whether to send child to school? “It is [food]\textsuperscript{17} the basic need. If they don’t have it, it’s difficult to expect from family to let child go to study and then work. So for me it has to be more realistic on that”, - says

\textsuperscript{15} 2003 Time Magazine Asian Hero

\textsuperscript{16} www.maetaoclinic.org

\textsuperscript{17} author
Respondent A\textsuperscript{18}. He thinks that when the question of survival is on agenda, it is more difficult for NGO workers to explain migrant parents the importance of child development and child participation.

Respondent B and others agrees to Respondent A and adds that tough economic situation contributes to malnourishment, intellectual retardation and narrow-mindedness:

- Respondent E says that in comparison to Western kids, Burmese migrant children are “tiny and short, and a bit too skinny” - she assumes that they don’t eat enough even at school, where food is provided by Western NGOs.
- Respondent B continues that limited access to quality education makes children miss the opportunities that Thai children are enjoying. For example Respondent F speaks about children who graduate from Grade 12 of migrant school and want to study at the university, but they cannot, because they lack citizenship.
- Lastly, Respondent D adds that economic conditions that many migrant families live in dehumanize them, making some parents sell their children to get a small profit. Respondent E confirmed that there are cases of domestic violence that children face.

Furthermore, Respondent A notes that the difficulties to adapt to new country, language, speed and level of life are other difficult factors that children have to face:

- Most of migrants don’t speak Thai when they first come to Thailand – in fact they have to learn it by themselves, because there are no special courses available for them for the price they can afford (Respondent A).
- Technological advancement of Thailand contrasts strikingly to the native places of many migrants – many migrants come from rural areas. While many Thai children can be seen using the means of modern technology in their daily lives, for most of migrant children computer and good mobile phone is an unattainable luxury (Respondent A). In contrast, Respondent C describes migrant children who own iPhones, use internet on a daily basis in internet cafes or on their own computers.

Respondent A connects outlawed status of unregistered migrants to the level of crime. On the one hand not able to find jobs officially, migrant children may choose crime as their source of income. On the other hand, they may fall victims of crime of others – exploitation is not rare among legally unprotected migrants (CPPCR, 2009:12). Drug abuse is one the issues pointed out

\textsuperscript{18} More information about interviewees can be found in the table located in Appendix
by Respondent D in the interview for this research. Respondent F testified that some of the children even carry guns. Respondent G says that poverty and pressure to make certain amount of money a day pushes children into crimes.

2.3 NGOs and CBOs working with migrant population in Tak province

There is a variety of NGOs – local Thai as well as international, and CBOs – including migrant schools, art and craft centers, clinics and other locally-run organizations. Temples are often involved in social and community development. There are no written sources specifically on the situation of NGOs and CBOs working with migrants, so this part of the chapter is based on the information about these organizations that have been obtained during my fieldwork. This part of the chapter is aimed to complete the portrayal of the context of migrant children’s lives in Tak province.

Migrant population in Tak province benefits from the work of NGOs and CBOs to different extent. Unregistered stateless migrants, who are considered to be illegal migrants and are subjects to detention and deportation (CPPCR: 2009) if they’re detected by Thai immigration officers are often dependent in NGOs and CBOs to provide basic services like education, healthcare and even nutrition. Fear of being deported is one of the important factors that contributes to vulnerability of unregistered migrant population, and restricts their access to services available to them. I’ve met a young couple living at Mae Sot city dump who didn’t take their three-year old son who cut his foot badly and was developing a systematic infection to Mae Tao clinic because he was afraid to be caught by police. If NGO worker did not escort father and child to the clinic on time, little boy was at risk of death. Registered migrants are less dependent on NGOs and CBOs in their daily lives – some of them send their children to Thai schools, while others choose community-based schools and healthcare (NHRCT, 2009:8).

There are two major types of migrant schools that provide basic education to migrant children in Tak province – schools founded and sponsored by Western donors and NGOs, such as USAid, and locally-run schools, founded by members of Burmese community. Schools from the first category have some Western staff working and teaching English. Schools from the second category are usually smaller and are often designed as boarding schools for street migrant children. Through teachers and parents whom I met at schools performing participant observations I have learned that both types of schools usually provide children with one to three meals a day, which often provide more nutritious food than children would get at home, and

19 http://www.usaid.gov/
which is one of the major factors parents reported to take into consideration when deciding to send their kids to school. Pictures 2 and 3 in Appendix envision how different can migrant schools look.

Apart from certification migrant schools vary from official Thai schools in several aspects (Suwanpitak, 2008). In Thai school the language of instruction is always Thai and there is no chance for Burmese children to practice their own language. Teachers explained to me that nearly all migrant schools offer instruction in native language of students – usually Karen or Burmese, which allows children to integrate into Burmese community in Tak province. Thai language is usually the part of curriculum too as it increases the chances for better employment prospects (CPPCR, 2009:55). English is taught in most of schools by teachers from Western countries (Respondent E is one of them).

Another difference, indicated by school staff, is that even though formally Thai schools are free and open for everyone, additional expenses related to schools supplies, school building maintenance, school uniforms and extra-curriculum activities require money that not all of the migrant families possess. NGO- and CBO-run migrant schools are free of charge and supply children with books, uniforms and sometimes provide transportation and meals. Thus, attending a migrant school is the only chance for unregistered migrant children to get education in Thailand. According to Respondent F, even though most of them are not officially recognized by Thai government, children who manage to graduate from these schools have a chance to find employment in NGO and CBO sector. Some schools have vocational training for doctors, teachers and agricultural workers. Therefore, migrant schools are more self-sustained and are usually local community-oriented, and provide prospects for diligent students while at the same time supporting Burmese local community.

Healthcare services provided by Thai government address mainly registered migrants, while unregistered turn to non-governmental providers such as Mae Tao clinic, which doesn’t charge Burmese migrants any money. What unregistered migrants do not get because of their legal status is insurance and planned health checks. Mae Tao clinic serve the population of about 150,000 people and is a community-based organization well-known in Thailand, in Burma and in the world. Health condition along the border is reported to be poor due to bad sanitary conditions and lack of clean drinking water (CPPCR, 2009:48). Cholera, dengue fever and malaria breakouts are not rare in the region. Children are facing malnutrition, diarrhea and

http://maetaoclinic.org/health-services/overview/
infections (ibid.). Health status of Burmese migrants in Thailand is related to their legal and economic status – illegal migrants have more hurdles on their way to health even though community has services to provide them (NHRCT, 2009:8). Registered migrants have comparative advantage in terms of access and availability of health services. Economic situation is directly related to hygiene and sanitation, which respectively influence the condition of one’s health. Picture 4 in Appendix is taken at prosthetics department of Mae Tao clinic, Picture 5 depicts delivery room.

A range of faith-based NGOs (excluding Buddhist temples) are usually run by Westerners and promote education, children’s basic rights, maternal health and gender equality for Burmese migrants. Some of them – for example Compasio\(^\text{22}\), - build orphanages and take care of street and abandoned children as well as provides support to the community living at the city dump site. Jesuit Refugee Service assists with recreating livelihoods. Committee for Protection and Promotion of Child Rights (CPPCR)\(^\text{23}\) is involved in legal assistance and advocacy activities targeting stateless children in Tak province.

Distinct group of CBOs and NGOs focuses on empowerment of women, development of arts and recreational centers for women and children. Social Action for Women (SAW)\(^\text{24}\) promotes gender equality, provides legal assistance to gender based violence victims, aids migrant child workers and children prone to violence. SAW collaborates with other local organizations to provide diverse services to migrant population. Burma Border Children Art Center\(^\text{25}\) and Studio Xang\(^\text{26}\) promote specifically children’s arts, and the latter’s initial focus is child development through arts.

These are just a few examples of NGOs and CBOs assisting migrant population in Tak province. Apart from them, other organizations all over Thailand are involved in support actions towards migrant population from Burma. Many organizations with headquarters in Bangkok and Chiang Mai perform research and issue policy-recommendations. For example Children on the Edge\(^\text{27}\) and UNICEF South-East Asia\(^\text{28}\) – they rely on partner NGOs/ CBOs already operating along the border to provide services to migrant children or to perform research on the field. Their activities are usually focused on certain areas – Children on the Edge collaborates with SAW to

\(^{22}\) [http://compasio.org/Compasio/Compasio.html]

\(^{23}\) [http://cppcr.wordpress.com/]

\(^{24}\) [http://www.sawburma.net/]

\(^{25}\) [http://www.bbc-art.org/about.html]

\(^{26}\) [http://www.studioxang.org/]

\(^{27}\) [http://www.childrenontheedge.org/]

\(^{28}\) [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/eastasia.html]
provide shelters for street children in Tak. UNICEF also partners with SAW to provide Thai language training to migrant children, is involved in funding of targeted projects and is occupied with policy-making. But not only international NGOs take part in designing policy recommendations. Local organizations such as CPPCR base their activities on research they conduct with collaboration of other local NGOs and CBOs (Mae Tao Clinic, migrant schools).

Overall, experiences of Burmese migrants in Thailand are very diverse. I’ve met stateless people, who are considered as traitors in Burma, but praised by Burmese community in Thailand. I’ve met people who are economically well-off and who managed to turn disadvantages into opportunities – and their children who speak fluent Thai and go to Thai schools. I’ve also met people who live in garbage dumps with their children. Some of them are brought there by economic hardships, while others consider the place to be their shelter from aggressively tuned Thai people and immigration police. Children who grow up in the atmosphere of hostility may feel alienated and subordinated, which does not contribute to better relationships with local Thai population. My fieldwork experience confirmed that it’s improper to generalize the circumstances of Burmese migrants and their children in Thailand to their vulnerabilities. All of the migrants I had a chance to speak to admitted that their lives are just fine, and they’re doing the best they can. My interview respondents declared that lives of migrants in Thailand are still better than back in Burma. Multiple NGOs and CBOs concentrated along the border assist migrant population to cope with the difficulties of being a foreigner in another country. The next part of the chapter presents the summary of NGO and CBO work along the border.

Chapter 3: Perceptions and Representations of Migrant Children Living in Tak Province, Thailand

In analyzing interviews and reports I concentrated on major themes that have been covered in the theoretical part of this research – perceptions of childhood, agency and empowerment, in order to answer research questions. Establishing the connections between perceptions and representations of these concepts will help to understand how Burmese migrant children are perceived and represented by aid workers in Tak province. The citations provided as examples are chosen to better illustrate the variety of points of discussion.

29 http://www.sawburma.net/2008/08/14/safe-house-for-orphaned-and-abandoned-children/
3.1 Childhood

Characteristics often ascribed to children in the West and constituting the “exported” notion of childhood have been tested in this part of the thesis. In order to understand how childhood is constructed by NGOs and CBOs, their workers have been asked to describe children they are working with. Data from the interviews have been matched with data derived from reports that reflect representations of Burmese migrant children living in Tak province.

Nearly all of my respondents noted the importance of the context in understanding what migrant childhood along Thai-Burma border is like. “They all have different backgrounds – you can’t describe them with the same terms, and our goal is to understand that background”, - holds Respondent A, - “We approach them as every other child without prescribing labels to them”.

Nevertheless, I was able to identify several codes in my respondents’ speeches about childhood.

3.1.1 Rational/ irrational child

In the West outside of academia rationality is still perceived to be an inherently adult quality (Ansell, 2005: 16). However, almost all of my respondents agreed in thinking that children they’re working with are rational. Respondent A clearly acknowledges the ability of children to make deliberate choices for themselves (about staying at school/ dropping-out or migration), and other respondents recognize that children’s rationality is the basis for involving them in participatory research. Respondent D remains skeptical, and holds that without education as a guide children are not able to make rational choices and responsible decisions. He says: “they can be anybody, they can be shaped”.

In the reports challenges and difficult situations are viewed as the rationale behind children’s decisions. CPPCR report provides an example about a 14 year old boy who was abused by his parents and had to leave home. His further decision to marry 13 year old girl was defined as enforced and not rational (CPPCR, 2009: 45).

It’s interesting to note, that rationality of parents of migrant children is questioned by some respondents and in the reports. Parents don’t understand why children need education (Respondent F), send their children to work in Bangkok, without challenging their safety (CPPCR, 2009: 80).

3.1.2 Weak/ strong

Western notions of childhood are based on perception of children as weak and vulnerable (Brocklehurst, 2006: 16). Only half of the respondents characterized children as strong. Respondent A talks about children as strong physically and emotionally. Physical and emotional strength are argued to be the results of physical work, that children chose to do to support their
families. Emotional strength is acknowledged by Respondent E: “They are very strong, these kids... I think it’s because of their culture. So many times when something bad happens I ask them – “Are you gonna cry?” – “No, it’s not good”. So they’re very strong and they never cry. It seems weak to cry in front of somebody or.. I don’t know how they’re feeling inside. Because from outside they’re always smiling”. In contrast, Respondent B says: “As I’ve heard from the children themselves, they’re really willing to stand up for their life, for their families. But their capacities, their views are limited”.

In general reports promote the image of a weak child – the child who is a target and victim of drug-dealers (CPPCR, 2009: 44), abusive factory managers (Vungsiriphisal et al., 2009) and is physically malnourished (CPPCR, 2009: 13). Weak children as a focus justify policy interventions and strengthen emphasis on importance of child protection (Burman, 2007:241). Such representations give grounds to view and study migrant children as “minority” - prompting pity and further stigmatizing them (Ansell, 2005:22).

3.1.3 Public/ private
It is interesting to see how NGO and CBO workers view migrant children in spatial terms. "Exported” notions of childhood convey the necessity of keeping children away from adult spheres (public) such as hard work, war and sexual relationships, while such spaces as home, school and church (private) are considered as safe and appropriate for them (Ansell, 2005:11). The question arises – what can be conceived as private space for these children since many of them do not have the right to be in Thailand? Also, can orphanage and boarding house be named a private space? There is no agreement between my respondents on this question, neither on the question of safety of these spaces. From one point of view, six out of eight respondents view home or boarding house as a safe place, where children should spend time after school. Two others indicated that home (the place where child’s family stays) might not be safe, neither can be school – domestic violence, guns at school are two problems indicated by Respondent E and Respondent F respectively. What comes to working places, Respondent G is the only one who advocates strongly against children’s work – in fact it’s a policy of his organization, which prohibits all children under their care to work. Nevertheless, he as well as other seven respondents agrees that “If your income is very low, you’re desperate, it’s easy to judge and say “you should send your child to school” rather than make the ends meet”.

While most respondents during interviews expressed understanding of certitude of child’s labor in extreme cases of poverty, reports stay uncompromising towards replacing school with work for children under 15. For example IRC report characterizes children’s motivation to help their parents instead of going to school as “ inappropriate and unrealistic developmental
expectations…” (IRC, 2011: 13). Schools are seen as the places keeping children away from drug-dealers (CPPCR, 2009: 44) and domestic violence (ibid.,45). Nevertheless, children who attend Thai schools are reported to be facing bullying, blaming and punishment from fellow students and sometimes – from teachers (ibid., 46). The same report provides a story of two girls of 14 and 15 years old, who ran away from home and quit school to start working and who have been raped by their bosses (ibid.,48).

The reports express more clearly defined stance on “proper” and “improper” places for children than NGO workers I’ve been interviewing. The world outside home and school is perceived to be dangerous and brings experiences “unsuitable” for children of school age.

Defining which places are “proper” or “improper” for children is inevitable prerogative of adults in Western cultures (Boyden in Ansell, 2005:11). But in different context, where children due to various reasons often choose to make money at the places such as factories or on the streets, these definitions fail to reflect the objective realities, where children’s families strive to make both ends meet.

3.2 Agency

Developmental psychologists approached agency as the ability to adapt or being in control of the situation (Ansell, 2005:17). While only half of the respondents characterized children as strong, almost all of them were making examples of children who were finding their ways to cope with difficult life situations. The answers of interviewees indicated several ways migrant children of the border express their agency.

- Rationalizing and concentrating on the positive aspects of their lives.

Respondent A gives an example: “if you ask the children – “Do you want to work?” , - “Yes, of course”. Because actually working for them is quite fun. The feel that it makes them more mature, that’s like “I’m growing up””. By choosing to focus on benefits of the task they have to do children are acknowledging their strength and maturity.

- Devoting themselves to studies.

Respondent E discusses that children who do not drop out after the grade 4 are usually really willing to study. “You see them in the classroom paying attention. In Europe education is compulsory. But these kids go to school because they want to”. Their agency is expressed in deliberate desire to finish their education. Respondent F adds that some of his students understand, that they would not have the chance to get as many years of education in Burma, and thus, do their best at school.
• Several respondents note that children want to bring positive changes to their community. Respondent F recounts that after graduation his students want to be trained as doctors, teachers and nurses and work in Mae Tao clinic, their own school or come back to Burma and work with inhabitants of their villages and communities.

• Strong interest in getting new and diverse information has been noted by 2 respondents. Students of Respondent F listen to radio and TV every morning and discuss and comment on political situation in Burma. Children Respondent H is working with use internet to know more about such extra-curriculum topics as human rights.

• Some children take “it could have been worse” stance and express sympathy to those who are in worse situations than they are (Respondent H)
• Several interviewees said that children they work with have big dreams and are not afraid to fight for them.

Respondent H makes examples of children who want to study in international universities and are working towards acquiring legal status in Thailand and apply for scholarships in order to reach their goals.

• Children don’t like to be labeled as “vulnerable” and demure to be depicted as marginalized.

Children living on the city dump expressed their negative attitude towards their pictures being published in newspapers, and said it hurts their dignity.

All these ways to expressing one’s agency provide good example that migrant children are able to choose strategies of coping with problems of migrant life with their own strategies. Some of these strategies would not be relevant without facilitation of NGOs and CBOs, but some of them derive from children’s personal strength and willing to change their lives. Those respondents who did not acknowledge agency of migrant children of Thai-Burmese border gave several explanations:

• These children are very narrow-minded, have less choices and capacities

Respondent B compares Burmese migrant children to Thai children, and argues that “they don’t know what they want”. 
• Several respondents identified limited geographical mobility due to unresolved legal status as the reason why children cannot be agents.

Respondent C links it to uncertainty about children’s future, while Respondent F compares statelessness as a major contributor to disillusionment of children.

• Respondent D argues that major factor limiting children’s agency is fear – mostly fear of parents and also fear to speak openly. Nevertheless, he is sure that education is the power that can bring agency to children as they grow up.

Interviews identified various views on children’s agency among NGO and CBO workers in Thailand. Half of the respondents provided examples of the ways children exercise their agency, while another half remained skeptical to the ability of children to actively participate in changing their realities. It is interesting that skeptical respondents based their arguments on comparing situations of Burmese migrant children with realities of Thai children. While the first group responded that children are seeking encouragement in comparing themselves to those who are worse off, which stimulates them to find solutions to attain goals that only seem possible for Thai citizens.

Reports tend to portray children as passive actors – the rhetoric of reports turns them from actors to victims. For instance, in International Labor Organization’s report phrase “migrant children” is rarely used as a subject in a sentence. This phrase is usually positioned at the place of a complement. Moreover, the verbs that are used to describe the action applied towards these children often relates to traumatic or abusive activity - “The existence of child labor deprives migrant children of an education” (ILO, 2011: 102). In this sentence the possibility that children may deliberately choose work over studies is ignored, which places them in the position of victim, who has been “deprived” of education. However the same report acknowledges the increase in enrollment in official Thai as well as migrant schools (ibid., 97).

The difference between approaches described in the reports and those indicated by interviewees can be illustrated by the following example: while reports promote pressure, enforcement and intervention (IRC, 2011; NHRCT, 2009; ILO, 2006), sometimes on a family level (IRC, 2011:4), interviewees chose to “just intervene when it is dangerous... so bring them out of that... give them more skill, more potential and more support, and they can go by themselves” (Respondent A). “Support” rather than “intervention” approach promotes agency and coping abilities of migrant community, including children, by encouraging their participation and initiative, rather
than making them passive recipients of imposed activities. In other words, it supports their empowerment.

3.3 Empowerment

Various organizations choose to empower children in different ways. My respondents believe that they can empower children through several ways:

- By involving children in high-level policy-making.

Respondent A reported that his organization brings children to speak directly to ministers of six governments of Greater Mekong sub-region to convey their needs, their seeing of the projects and their insights on their future.

- By collaborating with government officials and donors to ensure access to basic services, providing more opportunities like grants and scholarships (Respondents B, C and F)
- Through education and professional development.

Respondent D equates education to “power”. He believes that knowledge of three basic languages – Burmese, Thai and English will open up more possibilities to escape the poverty trap for children. He says: “*I realized that knowledge is very powerful and it’s important to empower children so they can become men*”. Respondents E, F G and H also approach empowerment as education. Vocational trainings already provided some students with jobs in the community.

- Through personal development.

Nearly all respondents agreed that encouraging confidence, politeness, responsibility and ambitiousness helps children to find their ways in life.

- By involving parents and immediate family in the process of changing community – raising awareness about importance of child participation in decision-making, about consequences of early drop-outs and pushing children to quit school and start working (all respondents).

As we can see NGOs and CBOs choose to empower children on several levels – policy level, personal level and community level. Some of these ways reflect these organizations’ perceptions of children – their rationality, agency and capacity. Thus, empowering on policy level acknowledges children’s ability to make responsible decisions, identify their needs and rights. Empowerment through granting basic services can be perceived as the most “passive” way of empowerment, which is illustrated by the words of Respondent C: “*…you have an idea, you know what you want to accomplish, and then you seek advice from migrant population, what’s*
the best way to implement your program”. This case of empowerment does not let children to express their capacities at the stage of designing the project, but rather positions the NGO as more rational and powerful than those for whom the project is being designed.

3.4 Victimization

The recent decades noted the remarkable rise of viewing childhood as “threatened, invaded and polluted” (Stephens, 1995:9). Judged upon the standards of “exported” notion of childhood, Burmese migrant children might be viewed as “missing” (Burman, 1994: 242) their childhoods.

Two out of eight respondents characterized children as victims of migration. Here is what Respondent B says about them: “They have unfulfilled rights, they are marginalized. They are malnourished, intellectually retarding, narrow-minded, ... incapable to change the situation without being provided possibilities equal to those of Thai children”. He also adds that the lack of cooperation from the government limits the possibilities of change for better even more. Perceived incapacity or impossibility for migrant children to have better lives without intervention from organizations reflects uneven distribution of power – where the strong and rational NGO grants to weak irrational children the chance for better future, reflects the paternalistic power relations that were described in previous chapter (Burman, 2007: 241), and disregard children’s agency.

Respondent F considers children as victims who are trying to find the way to cope. “I think they’re both strong persons and victims. They are locked at this place – even if they have the assets, they’re smart – they can’t join the university, they can’t go wherever they want. On the other hand, if they become citizens here in Thailand – they cannot go back to their village in Burma. I can say that they’re also victims, because they escaped war, they are the children of the war”. The meaning this respondent ascribes to the word “victim” is different from the previous respondent. For him victimhood is not something that completely blocks the agency, but rather permanently influences children’s perceptions of their realities. The rhetoric of this case identifies the possibilities of coping with the situation rather than neglecting the feasibility of change.

Reports rather present the situation for migrant children as more dramatic than respondents explained it. Children are portrayed as deprived of possibility to decide for themselves (ILO, 2006: 42), physically and emotionally abused. They are portrayed as “generally exploited for the benefit of others”, (Vungsiriphisal et al., 2009), experiencing depression and expressing aggression (IRC, 2011: 4).
Discussion and Conclusion

Different actors tend to portray migrant children living in Tak province in really different ways. Within the group of eight interviewees their answers about children’s agency and power showed the whole spectrum of opinions. After interviewing all eight respondents, I had an impression that the children they were discussing were not the same. This speculation is confirmed by the ways they identified childhood by age. Even though question about the age was not in my list, Respondent A was describing children from 6 to 22 years old, Respondent G addressed children from 0 to 16, while Respondent D called persons of 14-15 years adults. Evidently, the children they described were “not the same”, they were often quite contrary, which makes me conclude about the multiplicity of childhood experiences, or citing Heather Montgomery – of “multiplicity of childhoods” (2010:50).

Interviews presented three various opinions on migrant children’s agency – arguments acknowledging children’s agency, arguments neglecting it as well as arguments questioning it. None of them can be viewed as right or wrong – they rather represent the variety of examples derived from their experience with migrant children. The same can be said about the perceptions of power – they all related to different children. Despite of the variety of the ways organizations choose to empower children – the evidence informs of increased recognition of children as equal members of society, who can participate in designing policies and projects and also make responsible choices for themselves. Thus, the perception of children as “incomplete”, weak and irrational is being progressively abandoned.

There are two respondents whose answers were deviant in terms of perceptions of agency and power. Respondent B and Respondent C characterized children as weak and marginalized, deprived of choices and possibilities, and unable to progress without intervention.

Policies and some academic pieces tend to homogenize the perceptions and representations of children’s experiences. They rarely provide points of view alternative to those that portray situation of migrant children as grim, children - as hapless and weak. I argue that this way of representing children illustrates victimization approach, and focuses on traumas rather than coping strategies. These reports emphasize such features as innocence, backwardness and passivity of migrant children. It lets me draw a conclusion and answer the main question asked in this thesis – even though both interviews and reports bring our attention to challenges faced by Burmese migrant children in Tak province, perceptions of these children by NGO and CBO workers provide more multi-faceted picture of their histories, while representations found in
reports tend to mainly present negative sides of their experience. Respondents indicated strong, rational and active sides of these children’s lives. In contrast, rather homogenous image represented in reports exhibit the features of “exported” notion of childhood. Additionally, strategies employed by my respondents reflect the approach to empowerment that promotes children’s agency, while approach exercised in reports and policy recommendations inhibits agency and contributes to further stigmatization and misrepresentation of children’s experiences.
References


VungSiriphasal, Premjai; Auasalung, Siwaporn; Chantavanich, Supang (2009) “Migrant Children in Difficult Circumstances in Thailand”, The Asian Research Center for Migration Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University

Appendix

Appendix 1 – Visual material

Picture 1. Moei river crossing. Photo: CPPR, 2009

Picture 2 – Agape Nursery School. Source:
Appendix 2 – Tables

Table 1. List of conducted interviews

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<th>Alias</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Respondent A</td>
<td>Project Manager in big international NGO</td>
<td>American-Thai</td>
<td>6 March, 2012</td>
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<td>Respondent B</td>
<td>Director of Thai NGO, partner of UN</td>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>12 March, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent C</td>
<td>UN agency Field Officer</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>19 March, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent D</td>
<td>Principal of community migrant school</td>
<td>Stateless (Karen)</td>
<td>20 March, 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent E</td>
<td>NGO migrant school teacher</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>20 March, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
<td>Role</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>CBO migrant school teacher</td>
<td>Stateless (Karen)</td>
<td>22 March, 2012</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>Faith-based NGO leader</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>22 March, 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Community clinic</td>
<td>Stateless (Karen)</td>
<td>23 March, 2012</td>
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Table 2. Discourse analysis units match table

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<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
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<td>C</td>
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