

Quantification and the Paradox of Measurement

Translating Children's Rights in Tanzania

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Enthusiasm for techniques of measuring and assessing performance in statistical and comparable ways is sweeping the field of human rights, as well as many other spheres of social life such as health, education, and global governance. But as global standards and measurement systems are applied to the complex array of local systems of governance, community, and social life around the world, the project of measurement faces the double challenges of commensuration and translation. Using a case study of the pilot test of a set of indicators developed to assess compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Tanzania, this article examines five types of translation involved in using human rights indicators: quantitative, conceptual, linguistic, cultural, and structural. These translations pose challenges to measuring phenomena not previously counted and understood as measurable within local communities. This is the paradox of measurement: to make something known it must be countable, but if it has not already been translated into commensurable and quantifiable terms, it is difficult to count and may remain unnoticed and uncounted. Issues uncounted in the past tend to remain ignored or poorly counted in the future. Insofar as decisions about what to count are under the control of governments and experts rather than local communities, this tendency to replicate existing subjects of counting tends to make visible issues that such groups consider important and neglect others that may have greater importance for local groups.

In 1993, Tanzania submitted its first periodic report to the committee that monitors compliance with the human rights treaty defining the rights of children, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Republic of Tanzania 2000).¹ The committee, an international group of 18 experts that meets regularly in Geneva, sent the report back to Tanzania for revision because of its lack of data (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2001). Tanzania resubmitted this first report in 1999 and a second periodic report in 2004 (United Republic of Tanzania 2000). Although the second report, which was heard in 2006, was not sent back, the CRC Committee complained again about the quality of data and noted the continuing need for better data, especially in a disaggregated form (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2006a). At a workshop on using early childhood rights indicators in Tanzania in 2010 attended by Summer Wood, a senior woman from the Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children said, "We feel shame every time

we go to Geneva to report [on the CRC], shame about our lack of data. When we sent them our first report, they sent it back because it did not meet the reporting requirements." A few participants at the workshop talked of wanting to feel "proud" of the CRC report to be submitted in 2012.

Consequently, when a group of academic researchers specializing in child development, supported by UNICEF and the CRC, approached the Tanzanian government and asked if they would participate in a pilot test of a new system of young children's rights indicators, the government agreed (Hertzman, Vaghri, Arekadas-Thibert 2013; Vaghri et al. 2011). The experience promised to help them produce a better report to the CRC. This article examines what happened.

Tanzania's experience with the CRC committee highlights a common problem for relatively poor developing countries: complying with the escalating demands for data by international organizations when such data are both expensive to gather and sometimes at odds with local modes of thinking. Converting social life into quantitative data requires trans-

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1. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is part of the multilateral treaty regime that creates the human rights system. It was completed in 1989 and as of 2014 had 194 states parties, those that have ratified it and committed themselves to complying with its terms.

lation into numbers, which can be difficult both organizationally and conceptually. In order to understand the process of quantification and its difficulties more thoroughly, we studied the pilot test of the child rights indicator framework, which was presented in a new manual, in Tanzania. The leaders of the team generously agreed to let us observe the pilot test process. Summer Wood spent 3 months studying the pilot test in 2009 and 2010 in Tanzania and 3 weeks examining its records in Vancouver after the pilot, while Sally Engle Merry interviewed the leaders of the indicator team and CRC committee members and attended the CRC meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, when the manual and the pilot test results were presented. Wood has considerable ethnographic research experience in Tanzania and speaks Kiswahili, while Merry has worked on human rights monitoring and the problem of quantification.

Struggles around the provision of adequate data by resource-poor developing countries have long been an issue in the fields of international development and governance (e.g., Jerven 2013; Ward 2004). As human rights monitoring has turned toward using more quantitative indicators to assess compliance with treaties, the demand for data on human rights compliance has increased as well, along with debates about the value of indicators for human rights monitoring (Fukuda-Parr 2011; Fukuda-Parr, Lawson-Remer, and Randolph 2009; Holland 2008; Ignatieff and Desormeau 2005; Merry 2015; Randolph et al. 2010; Rosga and Satterthwaite 2009).² The enthusiasm for techniques of measuring and assessing performance sweeping the field of human rights is inspired by models in business management, development economics, public health, education, and government administration. By developing concrete definitions of human rights obligations along with monitoring and evaluation systems, human rights advocates hope to make it easier to determine if states are complying with their human rights obligations (UN International Human Rights Instruments, OHCHR 2008, 2009). Monitoring and evaluation are widely touted as ways to increase state accountability (OHCHR 2012).

Yet, developing adequate data to satisfy international expectations is a serious challenge for poorer countries like Tanzania. Sometimes data are missing because they have not been gathered. Collecting information is expensive, and many countries lack the resources to carry out surveys of the population as well as an inadequate infrastructure for measurement, such as a lack of reliable electricity, computers, telephones, roads, and survey instruments. There may be little political interest in counting some things, no coordination among groups that do collect data, or reluctance to provide

information about some kinds of behavior, such as illegal acts or family violence.

But there are also things that are not counted because they are not conceptualized as countable. There may be gaps between the standards created at the global level, which are inevitably universal, and practices in national and local contexts. Some of the measures constructed at the global level are unfamiliar or inappropriate to local communities. For example, the obligation to establish a positive agenda for children's rights was widely unfamiliar in Tanzania, and there was little if any data available about it. Some indicators seek to quantify issues that have never been measured. Behavior that has never been counted requires considerably more cultural work in order to convert it into entities subject to enumeration than previously counted behavior. If there is a demand for data about something that has not been thought of as quantifiable, a common response is to use a proxy that has been counted, even if it fails to capture the phenomenon. For example, children's right to play could be measured by the availability of playgrounds, but this is a poor proxy for the extent of children's opportunities for leisure and play in a rural community.

On the other hand, things that have already been measured are more readily understood as measurable. They have been defined in numerical terms. In fact, the process of counting itself helps to define things by establishing and solidifying the concepts and converting them into numbers. For example, breast-feeding or registering a child's birth are both readily understood and measured in Tanzania. Because they have been measured in the past, they appear to be measurable. The effects of measurement are cumulative, in that things that have been measured in the past are easier to tame and quantify, such as gross domestic product or maternal mortality, than those without that history.

Thus, there are significant disparities between those things rendered quantifiable, which become visible, and those which are not, which tend to disappear from public debate and political consciousness. Why does it matter if something is counted? Things that are counted may well be the sites of intervention, assistance, or control. Things that are not measured often remain unnoticed and ignored. They are not likely to become the subject of policy initiatives or sites of reform. Since decisions to count or not to count often reflect the interests and concerns of political leaders and elites who have the resources to do the counting, inequalities in enumeration can contribute to inequalities of attention and ultimately to inequalities in assistance and state support. This article explores several obstacles to measurement as they appeared in the young children's rights project and considers the implications of unequal measurement for global inequalities.

The Cultural Work of Measurement

Measurement is far from a simple process of counting. Instead, it requires considerable interpretive and cultural work

2. A recent study of human rights measurement reports significant efforts over the last 30 years by human rights NGOs, political scientists, and UN agencies to develop tools for measuring human rights using events data, survey data, standard-based assessments, and administrative data (Landman and Carvalho 2010; see also Landman 2004).

to develop templates that can cross cultural and class boundaries and enable comparisons (see further Merry 2015). To apply global standards and measurement systems to the complex array of local systems of governance and social life in countries around the world requires a great deal of translation. It is necessary to convert global standards, systems of measurement, and ways of assessing performance for the wide array of local settings where they are applied. Global measurement systems cannot avoid using categories for enumeration and analysis that cover wide swaths of meaning and practice, but this makes it difficult to capture the complexity of local conditions. To apply global categories to local conditions requires translating particular words and concepts into another language and converting cultural ideas such as notions of parenting and kinship from one cultural space to another.

Global measurement systems also require strategies for making data comparable. This means making different things equivalent for purposes of comparison (Espeland and Stevens 1998). Money is a quintessential example of this process: insofar as everything has a price, everything can be compared along that single scale. Money commensurates. Measurement systems are based on comparing things that are the same in some respects and different in others. This requires determining a similar underlying criterion on which they can be compared and ignoring the diversities. To compare rates of poverty or hunger, for example, it is necessary to assume that these phenomena can be made equivalent across large gaps of culture or context. It is clear that what poverty means in a rural village in Uganda is quite different from what it means in the slums of Bangkok or in the dilapidated neighborhoods of Detroit. We use the same term for all three based on the core principle of a relative lack of wealth even though there are many differences in poor peoples' lives in these diverse places. Commensuration requires simplification and decontextualization in order to render concepts such as poverty countable. Certain core principles are extracted from the complexity of social life and taken as markers of the thing that is to be measured.

Translation and commensuration both involve redefining the meaning of things, but in different ways. Translation moves something from one frame of reference to another, while commensuration sits several different things side by side in one frame of reference and seeks to add them together on the basis of their similarities while ignoring their differences.

At the global level, the creation of principles of equivalence and categories of counting through translation and commensuration is typically the work of experts and cosmopolitan elites, while the project of collecting and organizing data that fit into these global templates is lodged in local communities. As in the case discussed here, translation and commensuration often require bringing distinct professional discourses together, such as law, public health, economic development, and social welfare, each of which has de-

veloped its own systems of categorization and counting. All of these translations require moving from one culturally embedded set of meanings and practices to another. Clearly, commensuration and translation are a conceptually difficult terrain, but those who seek to improve human rights compliance through quantification and indicators have developed pragmatic compromises that enable such measurement and evaluation to take place. The indicator framework for early child development and its manual provide an important example of an effort to work through this thorny problem.

Through the ethnographic analysis of the pilot test of the early child rights indicators as it took place in 2009 and 2010, we explore the considerable interpretive work of translation and commensuration that takes place between global measurement systems and local situations. We show that areas that have been measured in the past are more readily measured in the future. Measuring and counting things that are already understood as open to measurement face fewer challenges in translation and comparison, even between local and global systems. Conversely, new ideas, concepts, and modes of measurement are more likely to founder on mistranslation and the inability to commensurate. Since what is counted is what becomes visible, the implications of this disparity are that some things become more readily seen while others disappear from view.

This is what we call the paradox of measurement: it is easier to measure what is already recognized as measurable, while what has not been measured is much harder to translate into numbers or make commensurable with other things. The unmeasured is more opaque to new efforts, particularly from global sources. For example, it is far easier to measure the prevalence of birth registration or breast-feeding in Tanzania than it is to measure whether children are enjoying the right to play. We argue that such disparities in what is seen as measurable lead to varying levels of attention to issues. Differences in measurability reinforce the disparity between issues that seem important and those that do not. They tend to emphasize child survival over children's rights, for example. These disparities reflect which issues are of concern to governments and civil society at the local, national, and global level. At the same time, they reinforce these disparities. Since past practices of counting reflect political and economic concerns of those with the power to count, past inequalities shape what garners attention in the future. Clearly, what gets measured reflects preexisting state commitments and public concerns, while what is unmeasured are actions that seem as outside the domain of the state or public attention.

What does and does not get measured is important because, as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay points out, what we measure affects what we pay attention to. She recently remarked that a major shortcoming of many indicators, including the Millennium Development Goals, is that "we treasured what we measured, rather than the other way around" (Pillay 2013, n.p.). The effect of new

measurement systems is, therefore, to move things from the domain of the everyday and natural to that of the countable and measurable and therefore publicly recognized.

Following this logic, the early childhood indicators project hoped to raise the visibility of early child development by encouraging countries to produce more systematic and quantitative information about young children in their country reports. The goal was to raise the visibility of early child development as an issue in the human rights community and among governments. The CRC delineates the rights of children under age 18, but the project leaders wanted to focus on the rights of young children before school age. General Comment 7 (GC7), "Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood," was developed by the CRC Committee in 2006 because of concern about the lack of information about young children in country reports beyond basic statistics on child mortality, birth registration, and health care (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2006*b*:1). General Comments are issued by committees monitoring conventions to expand and clarify the terms of a convention but do not require separate ratification. GC7 focuses on children from infancy to the transition to school, which happens at various times, and uses a working definition of children under 8 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2006*b*:2).

Under the principle that quantification makes issues visible, the creators of the manual saw it as a way to make GC7 more prominent in the field of children's rights. The goal of the project was to convert the terms of GC7 into indicators that would be usable by states, help them with their reporting, raise the visibility of the human rights of young children, and systematize the reporting process. In order to accomplish these goals, however, the team had to find ways to make the terms of the GC7, including its ideas about childhood, autonomy, kinship, and personhood that are based on values and practices of the global North, relevant to communities that hold different ideas about children's lives. Issues of child development and the social determinants of health for young children had to be translated into the legal language of children's rights. Children's lives and actions had to be described comparatively and in numbers; the English of the CRC and GC7 translated into a local language; concepts of childhood, kinship, and parenting translated from a Western context to a developing country; and forms of governance, bureaucracy, and physical infrastructure familiar to wealthy industrial countries adapted to conditions where such infrastructural support was lacking. Altogether, this was no easy task.

In 2005, an international group of academic researchers and child development experts based largely in North America and Europe, as well as representatives from several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and charitable foundations concerned with children's issues, two from outside the West, several UNICEF and WHO staff members, and one member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, decided to tackle this task. In 2006, they approached

the CRC Committee and offered to develop early childhood rights indicators. The CRC approved the idea, and the Early Childhood Rights Indicators Group was formed. The group developed an indicators framework in 2008 and a manual based on the indicators in 2009 (Hertzman et. al. 2013; Vaghri et. al. 2011:181). Key leadership on the indicators framework came from Clyde Hertzman and Ziba Vaghri at the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) program at the University of British Columbia. The lead authors of the manual were Vaghri and Adem Arkadas (2009). The indicators framework was pilot-tested in Tanzania in 2009–10 and subsequently in Chile (Vaghri and Arkadas 2009:11). Following the first pilot study, the authors presented the results of the indicators pilot to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and after the second pilot was completed, they made the complete set of indicators and an extensive manual explaining their use freely available online for interested parties to use. This article draws on fieldwork conducted during the first pilot test of the indicators in Tanzania, as well as observations of a meeting of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva about the indicators and interviews with several of its creators.

Why, how, and for whom were these indicators developed? The authors of the GC7 indicators stated several objectives: to improve the collection of data on issues related to children's rights, to promote awareness of child development and human rights, and to assist state parties in preparing their required periodic reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Vaghri and Arkadas 2009:11). The authors intended these indicators for use primarily by government representatives charged with compiling periodic CRC reports, but also suggested that the indicators could be used by government ministries, NGOs and child rights advocates, academics, and members of international organizations (Vaghri and Arkadas 2009:12). Although the indicators are written in general language meant to be applicable to any country, lower income countries such as Tanzania often have difficulty producing the quality and quantity of data expected in their reports to the CRC, so developing countries seem likely to be the major users and subjects of such indicators. In this case, as more generally (Merry 2011), indicators are created largely by experts in the global North, but rely on data collection processes in the global South. This was certainly the case for the pilot of these indicators in Tanzania, and as we discuss below, tensions between the authors of the indicators and the Tanzanian data collectors led to some interesting translations and mistranslations throughout the pilot project.

The Early Childhood Rights Indicators Manual

The manual presents 15 indicators clustered around the six areas of the CRC reporting guidelines: implementation of the CRC; civil rights; the family environment; health and wel-

fare; education, leisure, and cultural issues; and protections for vulnerable children (see table A1 in the appendix, available online). The indicators include a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures, which are grouped into structure, process, and outcome indicators. The structure/process/outcome framework has become the predominant mode of organization for human rights indicators (Hunt 2003; OHCHR 2012) and measures states' commitments, efforts, and accomplishments (Vaghri et al. 2011). The first draft of the manual was 206 pages long with a chapter focusing on each indicator (Vaghri and Arkadas 2009). Each chapter explains the indicator in question, notes its place within the CRC and other human rights treaties, and explains how the indicator relates to the fulfillment of young children's rights. Sidebars throughout the chapters quote comments, both positive and negative, from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, on the status of the right in question, and how its implementation could be improved by various countries.

The centerpiece of each chapter is a multiple-page flowchart, designed to lead users of the indicators through a series of diagnostic questions in order to gather data on structure, process, and outcome subindicators. For example, the indicator for dissemination of the GC7 asks "What measures have been taken by your government to disseminate and promote a right-based understanding with respect to young children and to assess the impact on knowledge and practice of such 'dissemination' processes?" (Vaghri and Arkadas 2009:23). The process indicator asks whether there have been implementation efforts such as professional training, workshops, conferences, or other awareness-raising activities, and the outcome indicator asks whether there has been an increase in awareness among duty bearers or evidence of policy and legislative change or of other forms of implementation (Vaghri and Arkadas 2009:23–24). Another indicator on breast-feeding and complementary feeding defines policy indicators as laws and policies encouraging breast-feeding, process indicators as programs to promote breast-feeding at home and knowledge of its benefits, and outcome indicators as declines in the infant mortality rate, the percent of children being breast-fed exclusively for the first 6 months of life, and the number of children under 5 years old who are classified as underweight or stunted (Vaghri and Arkadas 2009:111–112). A series of suggested actions to make progress on the structure, process, and outcome variables for each indicator is also provided.

Following each flowchart is a list of suggestions of possible sources of data that could be used to answer the indicator questions. Each chapter of the manual concludes with an example from a developing country that is making progress on the indicator in question, such as a project in Jamaica that is studying how to promote awareness of children's rights or a successful breast-feeding promotion initiative in Iran. As we discuss below, these data collection suggestions do not take into account the numerous difficulties of accessing data

in many developing countries, even for government workers tasked with preparing their countries' reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Tanzania was selected as the first country in which to test the indicators, representing low-income countries (Vaghri et al. 2011:184). One of the indicator's authors remarked to Wood that given the relative difficulties of conducting the pilot in Tanzania, "if we can make these indicators work in Tanzania, they should be able to be used anywhere in the world." A pilot test lasting about 9 months took place from 2009 to 2010, headed by a full-time staff member from North America, who worked with a part-time Tanzanian assistant. Summer Wood observed the activities of the project as an ethnographer for 3 months and provided some assistance during project trainings and meetings in Tanzania in 2009 and 2010. The coordinator of the pilot recruited approximately 25 Tanzanian participants from several Tanzanian government ministries and departments, including the Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children (which is responsible for submitting the periodic reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child), the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, the Registration, Insolvency and Trusteeship Agency (which is responsible for birth and death registration of children), and the Commission for Human Rights and Good Governance. Several local and international NGOs in the area of child rights and child development were also key participants. The participants came from different fields, including education, public health, nutrition, child development, social science research, social work, and law. Only a few of the participants from the Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children were actually involved in writing Tanzania's periodic reports to the CRC. Most participants had no experience of working on reports to human rights treaty bodies, although several people from research-oriented organizations and the Ministry of Health had worked with previous indicators projects in the health sector.

The Tanzanian participants formed teams to test each of the indicators by working through the flowcharts and collecting available data over a period of several months, with each person working on several indicator teams. Most people were based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest city, but several NGO representatives were from smaller cities and towns in north, west, and central Tanzania. The participants had been volunteered by their ministries and organizations to work on this project and received modest per diem payments for attending meetings and completing the data collection, but they did not receive additional salary for their work or any extra time to complete their work in addition to their ordinary job responsibilities. The key authors of the manual traveled to Tanzania three times, first for a multiple-day training to introduce the indicators to the Tanzanian participants and divide them into working groups, second, several months later, for a mid-term meeting to present preliminary findings

and to discuss issues and problems they encountered in the data collection, and third, at the end of the pilot, to present the preliminary findings of the pilot test. The team gave a copy of the indicators and the data collected to representatives of the Tanzanian government.

Human Rights in Tanzania

Tanzania was an interesting choice for the GC7 indicators pilot test for several reasons. First, although Tanzania has made significant progress in some areas of children's welfare, such as reducing mortality rates for children under 5 by nearly half since 1990, the vast majority of children live in households subsisting on less than \$2 a day, and face numerous problems with health, education, and poverty (UNICEF 2012). Tanzania has been praised by the World Bank for its rapid economic growth in recent years (Morisset 2012), but the economic situation of most households remains difficult. As we discuss below, Tanzania's level of development introduced some challenges into the pilot that were unforeseen by the authors of the indicators, such as rolling electricity blackouts affecting most ministries and local NGOs (although not well-resourced foreign NGOs with generators), which limited participants' abilities to type reports and search for data for the indicators.

Second, Tanzania's record on human rights is complicated. Tanzania has ratified most of the major human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (acceded 1976), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (acceded 1976), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (ratified 1985), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified 1991), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified 2009). However, progress on harmonizing the provisions of the treaties with domestic laws, and on fulfilling treaty obligations, has been much slower. In 2009, Tanzania passed the Law of the Child Act, which translates some key provisions of the Convention of the Rights of the Child into Tanzanian law. However, although the Tanzanian Law of the Child Act defines a child as any person below age 18, in accordance with the CRC, the Tanzanian Law of Marriage Act still sets the age of legal marriage for girls at 15, while the minimum age of marriage for boys is 18 (African Child Policy Forum 2012). Thirty-seven percent of Tanzanian girls are married by age 18 (UNICEF 2012), a situation which child rights advocates argue is linked to human rights violations for girls (UNICEF 2005). In its 2012 periodic report to the CRC, Tanzania stated that the gender disparity in age of legal marriage remained unchanged in Tanzanian law because it "touches on certain religious beliefs" but that public consultations on the issue were ongoing (United Republic of Tanzania 2012:37).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has cited past periodic reports from Tanzania for a number of areas of concern in addition to the child marriage issue. As we indicated,

lack of sufficient data on child rights in Tanzania was cited as a "principal area of concern" by the CRC Committee in 2006 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2006a). The GC7 indicators pilot was promoted to the Tanzanian government as a way to help improve the quality of data in future CRC reports, a goal that was also supported by UNICEF. More generally, human rights activists and some treaty body members are promoting indicators as a way to streamline the process of monitoring compliance with human rights treaties (OHCHR 2012).

Outside government or development circles, indicators are relatively new and little known in Tanzania except for indicators of corruption. Each year, Tanzania's score on the Corruption Perceptions Index of Transparency International is reported by local media and compared enthusiastically with the scores of neighboring countries, particularly Kenya and Uganda. In 2012, Tanzania's rank of 102 (out of 176 countries) "beat" both Kenya (139) and Uganda (130) (Transparency International 2012). Problems with both methodological and political aspects of the Corruption Perceptions Index have been widely discussed (Andersson and Heywood 2009). Despite their general concern about corruption (see Afrobarometer and REPOA 2013), the Tanzanians Wood talked to took some comfort in being ranked as slightly less corrupt than their neighbors. Clearly, this is a technology on its way up.

Translating Child Rights in Tanzania

The process of translation is fundamental to the circulation and implementation of human rights concepts around the world (Merry 2006b). Translation is a key aspect of vernacularization, the process by which transnational human rights ideas are adapted to local contexts (Merry 2006a). Vernacularization involves several types of translation: framing of human rights ideas in terms of local images, symbols, and stories; adapting human rights programs to the structural conditions under which they operate; and defining target populations and tailoring programs accordingly. Translators are the "people in the middle" who aid the process of vernacularization by translating "discourses and practices from the arena of international law and legal institutions to specific situations of suffering and violation" (Merry 2006b:39). Translators are often local elites who work with governmental or nongovernmental organizations to promote human rights either through providing programs and services, or by efforts to promote legal reforms based on human rights principles. The process of translation takes place in contexts of unequal power, and translators are both powerful and yet vulnerable as they circulate between and try to respond to the varied agendas and expectations of governments, donors, and local people.

In the case of indicators, the process of translation is not one-directional but multidirectional. Translation takes place across continents, languages, and cultural contexts since in-

icators are designed to create commensurability and facilitate comparison across many different contexts (Espeland and Stevens 1998, 2008). Human rights indicators are not designed to adapt to the local context but to measure compliance consistently across contexts. They rely for authority on claims to objectivity and universality. But in practice, indicators have to recognize the local context to some extent, in terms of what data are available, what indicators are relevant, and what structural constraints exist that affect the completion and accuracy of the indicators.

Below we discuss five dimensions of translation that took place within the GC7 indicators project: translation into numbers, translation between conceptual frameworks, linguistic translation, cultural translation, and structural barriers to translation. As the case study shows, the work of translation is difficult for all actors involved, and often gives rise to multiple understandings and misunderstandings that affect the creation and use of indicators and their effectiveness for measuring compliance.

Translation into Numbers

Perhaps the most challenging translation problem for human rights indicators is quantification. How can broad principles of the CRC, such as ensuring "to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child" (Article 6), be translated into specific policies, actions, and outcomes that can be quantified, measured, and compared across countries? Team members in the pilot project were charged with locating documents that provided policy, program, and outcome data for each indicator in the manual. At the end of the project, the organizers counted how many documents of each kind were received for each indicator and assessed which ones were relevant to the issues of the indicator. Documents were categorized in the structure/process/outcome framework, reinterpreted as policy/program/outcome. The number of documents for each indicator provides an idea of how many policies and programs exist and where data are being collected by both government and civil society. Programs and policies may be sites where the indicator is being defined and counted. Thus, information on the number of documents for each indicator provides a rough estimate of what is being counted and what is not. There is significant variation among indicators in the extent to which they are being addressed and measured. The results suggest that it was easier to understand and gather relevant data, policy, and program information for established measures of child development, health, and nutrition than it was for newer and less familiar ideas about the rights of young children to make decisions, to play, and to be treated as rights-bearing persons. We argue that this is because the former were more familiar and conceptually developed than the latter. Consequently, they were also more readily counted.

At the CRC Committee meeting in Geneva in June 2010, the research team presented the results of the pilot test in

Tanzania. They presented a Power Point report that provided data on the number of relevant and irrelevant documents submitted for each of the six clusters of indicators. Overall, 20% of the documents were classified as outcome data, but the number of outcome documents varied significantly among topics. The research team found that many of the 150 documents that were gathered were not relevant to the indicator for which they were collected. This suggests some confusion about the meaning of the indicators and their translation into the everyday workings of government and civil society in Tanzania. Data collection was more successful for familiar child development issues such as child survival, breast-feeding, nutrition, and birth registration than it was for more diffuse and unfamiliar issues intended to promote a human rights perspective on young children such as the dissemination of GC7. Of 13 documents submitted about birth registration, 11 were judged to be relevant, for example. On four measures of basic health and welfare—basic material needs, child survival and health, breast-feeding and complementary feeding, and access to health services and health education—56 documents were submitted and 62 were deemed relevant, 15 of which provided outcome data. Indicators for which information was available and correctly identified as relevant were those dealing with issues of child health and survival, long of concern to donors and the Tanzanian government. Not only do government, civil society, and international organizations have experience with counting them, but they are more readily translated into numbers, and techniques have been developed to track these numbers. It is possible to count, with some degree of accuracy, how many mothers are breast-feeding or how many children under 5 do not have birth certificates. Many of these issues have been long-standing priorities for the Tanzanian government and international aid efforts and are addressed by established programs and policies. Global social surveys such as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) sponsored by UNICEF or the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) funded by USAID regularly collect data on many of these indicators for developing countries. Thus, issues such as child health and breast-feeding have a history of program development and data collection, driven by donors as well as states.

However, newer and less familiar issues were far more difficult to quantify. Some were hard to conceptualize while others had simply never been counted. Some came from global human rights standards that were not readily understandable or appropriate to the Tanzanian context and represented a considerable shift in conventional ways of thinking about young children. Some of the most difficult, based on the low number of appropriate documents, were knowledge of child rights, setting a positive agenda for child rights, the right of children to participate in household decision making, and the right to play. A positive agenda for child rights had no relevant outcome measures at all. The manual defines it as: "General Comment 7 (article 5) calls on State parties to construct a Positive Agenda to help realize rights

in early childhood, especially for children below age 8 (article 4). GC7 obliges State parties to assign resources to develop and implement a country-specific Positive Agenda accompanied with a National Plan of Action (NPA) for young children” (Vaghri and Arkadas 2009:31). Similarly, the cluster of indicators under General Measures of Implementation, which includes “dissemination of GC7, A Positive Agenda, Human Rights Training, and Data Collection Systems” had 48 documents submitted, of which only 39 were considered relevant to the topic. There were no outcome documents for any of these indicators. Not only did the Tanzanian government and NGO officials find fewer appropriate measures for these variables, but they were also less certain which ones were relevant than for basic health and welfare. New human rights concepts such as creating “a positive agenda for human rights” are difficult to conceptualize and quantify.

An absence of data can also result from a reluctance to make behavior known. It was hard to collect data on violence against children, for example, since most rights violations of this kind go unreported. One team member from the Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children explained some reasons for the lack of data on child rights: “Due to cultural reasons, people feel ashamed to report violations of their rights, especially if violations are committed by family members. As Africans we feel embarrassed to report these things, and even if you do report, it may not be reported in time. . . . Also we don’t have places to put these culprits, or to treat the children who suffer abuse.” If human rights violations are difficult to speak about, they will certainly be difficult to count. Even issues that are not conceptually murky or politically sensitive may not be measured simply because no one has counted them. For example, a basic measurement such as counting the number of human rights trainings taking place in Tanzania proved very difficult for the indicator teams, since such activities are carried out by many different organizations, and no single entity was responsible for collecting and coordinating that data.

This is the paradox of measurement: indicators reveal information about issues that are already being measured well, but they do not shed light on important problems that are not being measured. Problems that are unfamiliar, considered unimportant, difficult to measure, or that happen in places with poor or no measurement systems show up on indicator reports as blanks. If they are not important they are not counted, but if they are not counted, they will appear as not important. This paradox means that it is critical to ask: who or what is not being counted, and why?

Translation between Conceptual Frameworks

All indicators rely on particular conceptual frameworks for their structure and content. The GC7 indicators sought to combine two such frameworks: child development and human rights. At a conceptual level, the main task of the indicators was to translate the principles of child development

into the language of human rights. Clyde Hertzman had worked extensively on research on the social determinants of health for young children and saw the possibilities of adapting these issues for a human rights framework (Hertzman and Williams 2009). The end goals of the child development and children’s human rights frameworks are quite similar—to promote the well-being of children—but they differ in both theory and practice in some significant ways. Child development is defined as “the ordered emergence of interdependent skills of sensori-motor, cognitive-language, and social-emotional functioning” (Engle et al. 2007:229), and the field includes experts in child health, education, and psychology (see Britto, Engle, and Super 2013). Child development theory also includes a focus on the social determinants of health, the idea that most health conditions are strongly influenced by socioeconomic, political, cultural, and environmental factors (WHO 2008; Hertzman, Vaghri, and Arkadas-Thibert 2013:373). The child development approach promotes funding for children’s welfare as an investment in the economic future of societies (Engle et al. 2007). For example, the Tanzanian participants in the GC7 indicators project were told that a dollar invested in child development would result in a later gain of \$7 in economic development for Tanzania.

A key difference in the child rights framework is its emphasis on the protection of children’s agency and respect for his/her rights. “Rather than viewing the young child as a passive recipient of ‘interventions’ to aid them on the way to becoming healthy, economically productive adults, it emphasizes the young child as a being with inherent human rights, *in present time*. Human rights discourse maintains that young children are holders of rights and should be respected for their inherent value as human beings, as well as for their skills and competencies” (Hertzman, Vaghri, and Arkadas-Thibert 2013:372). The CRC emphasizes rights to life, survival, and development as well as the best interest of the child and respect for the viewpoint of the child (Britto et al. 2013:69). Moreover, although human rights treaties generally focus on states as prime duty-bearers, the child rights framework includes the responsibilities of family and community as well as the obligations of ratifying states to ensure the rights of children and to protect them from violations by nonstate as well as state actors. This is a legal obligation first and foremost, not necessarily done for economic benefit; although of course the economic benefits of improving the health and education of children are well-documented (Engle et al. 2007). The social determinants of health framework seeks to improve the child’s cognitive, social, and emotional development, while the human rights perspective aims to protect the child and his/her autonomy and freedom of expression as well as guaranteeing the child adequate food, health care, and family relationships. Indicators of child development focus on survival and well-being while those of child rights consider whether states are fulfilling their treaty obligations (Hertzman, Vaghri, and Arkadas-Thibert 2013:375).

In the pilot test, indicators focusing on child development were more widely used and understood than the human rights ones, which sometimes seemed conceptually remote to the participants and distant from the way child welfare was generally understood in Tanzania (see fig. A1 in the appendix for an example of a Swahili-language UNICEF child development campaign in rural Tanzanian villages). Of the 15 GC7 indicators, only six were explicitly focused on human rights (dissemination of the CRC, setting a positive agenda for child rights, human rights training, human rights data collection, children's participation in decision making, and knowledge of rights), while the other nine were related to more traditional child development goals in the areas of health, education, protection from violence, and special needs children. Although these are also social and economic rights, they have less visibility as rights than as basic needs. As we have seen, the information collected by the teams suggested that the latter were more readily understood and measured than the former. The final report on the pilot attributes the differences in response to whether the indicators are concrete or abstract, but reliance on familiar conceptual frameworks and measurement experience seems more important.

Linguistic Translation

Translating indicators and texts from one language to another is obviously another form of translation, yet it is typically viewed as an unproblematic and straightforward task in international human rights and development contexts. English is the working language of the vast majority of human rights indicators, including these GC7 indicators. The GC7 indicators were presented in Tanzania in English and were not translated into Kiswahili, although the indicators were later translated into Spanish for the Latin American pilot. All of the Tanzanian participants in the indicators project spoke English well, although at group meetings they often preferred to conduct discussions in Kiswahili and then report back to the foreign indicators team members in English.

However, just because the GC7 indicators were in English does not mean that language was not a significant translation issue. In the realm of human rights, language translation is often seen as a technical problem of translating legal meanings accurately from one language to another. For example, in the manual, the GC7 indicator concerned with dissemination of the CRC asked whether the text of the CRC had been translated into local languages, with the unspoken assumption that if the words themselves were translated, people would somehow access these words, be able to read them, and understand and absorb the ideas. In addition to issues of literacy rates and access to pamphlets, even the language of human rights is often difficult to translate (see Englund 2006).

The word for "rights" in Kiswahili is *haki*, one of many Arabic loan words in the language, derived from the Arabic word *haqq* (Hirsch 1998). *Haki* is used to refer to rights, including human rights (*haki za binadamu*) but also other

many other kinds of rights. Clifford Geertz (1983:188–189) describes three distinct interpretations of the concept of *haqq*: a religious sense (reality/truth/fact/God), a legal sense (rights, duties, obligations), and an ethical sense (justice, fairness, proper actions). Hirsch (1998) notes that these multiple meanings carry over into the Kiswahili concept of *haki* as well. When people in Tanzania talk about *haki*, they are often not referring to *haki* as "rights" in the sense of seeking fulfillment of legal rights through the Tanzanian state or the international human rights system, avenues which are totally inaccessible to most Tanzanians. Rather, *haki* is more often used in discourses about justice or fairness more broadly, closely connected to ethical and religious obligations. Human rights discourses have been slowly growing in popularity in Tanzania in recent years, particularly among women's rights activists such as the Tanzania Women Lawyers Association (Hodgson 2002) and legal activist groups such as the Tanzania Legal and Human Rights Centre.³ These groups tend to use *haki* in both the legal sense (meaning "human rights") and the ethical sense (meaning "justice"), and advocate for changes to Tanzanian laws and legal prosecution of human rights violations. Despite the work of such groups, and the growing awareness of human rights among certain parts of society, human rights still is not the primary discourse of social justice in Tanzania.

What does the complicated relationship to the word "rights" in Tanzania mean for human rights indicators when they are translated from Kiswahili into English? An analysis of a key Tanzanian government draft document describing the national policy for child development found that the original, Kiswahili-language version of the policy referred to various plans for improving the lives of children as moral obligations, as duties of the state, and as requirements for national progress. The word *haki* did not appear. However, when the document was translated into English and distributed to donors, the word "rights" was liberally added throughout. In this moment of linguistic translation, the obligations of the state and parents to children that are conceptualized largely as moral and developmental in Kiswahili are translated into the language of rights, entitlements, and state responsibility in English.

The GC7 indicators, like most human rights indicators, are based on the premise that states are the main duty-bearers, with primary responsibility for fulfillment of human rights. The CRC emphasizes the role of the family, but state responsibility is still important. However, in many developing countries, including Tanzania, people find that they cannot count on the state for fulfillment of even basic human rights such as access to clean water. In response, many Tanzanians look beyond the state for access to basic rights such as education and health care for their children, whether

3. Tanzania Women Lawyers Association, <http://www.tawla.or.tz>; Legal and Human Rights Centre, <http://www.humanrights.or.tz>.

through civil society or religious organizations or help from family, neighbors, friends, and extended kin networks. These dimensions of activity, which are often crucial to fulfilling children's rights in developing countries, are not addressed in most human rights conventions, which focus on the actions of states. Thus, the Kiswahili version of the document articulated this position, but when translated into English, the orientation shifted.

Linguistic translation is not a simple matter; in this case, the English document conveyed a very different understanding of the role of rights and the state than the Kiswahili one. It appears that the Tanzanian state is increasingly aware of the need for human rights talk in certain circumstances, such as for human-rights-oriented donors. The demands of donors and accountability require technologies of counting that can travel across national borders and can be translated from one language to another. These technologies mean that local meanings are displaced by terms that enable global comparisons and conversations.

Cultural Translation

Cultural translation is a key problem for human rights indicators. Indicators use ostensibly universal categories and definitions of problems in order to generate knowledge that facilitates comparisons across countries and cultures (Merry 2011). However, since indicators are created and used by individual people embedded in specific cultural contexts, cultural translation—and mistranslation—is a crucial part of the indicators process.

For the GC7 indicators, even defining childhood was a challenge. The authors of the indicators based their work on the definition of a child used in the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (CRC, Article 1; UN General Assembly 1989). But at the training where the GC7 indicators were introduced to the Tanzanians who would be doing the data collection, one participant raised a difficult and culturally specific question about when a child's life begins:

Participant 1: What about miscarriages? Those lives are not recorded. We may celebrate reducing infant mortality, but what about miscarriages? We need to include these figures, but we don't have a system of recording this.

Participant 2: That depends on how do we define a child? Do we include children who have not been born yet?

GC7 indicators author: We have defined childhood starting at age 0. Age 0 is used because it's ambiguous: 0 can be conception if you want, or 0 can

be birth. This is done to avoid issues of abortion rights versus child rights.

Rather than engage with what the personhood of children means in the particular cultural, religious, and medical context of Tanzania, and how that might affect participants' understanding of child rights, the authors of the GC7 indicators attempted to offer a universalist—and from their perspective, noncontroversial—definition of when life begins. As Jasanoff (2011) shows, however, creating the point at which a fetus becomes a person is a political process that becomes naturalized over time in particular social contexts.

Cultural translation issues also arose around the seemingly straightforward issue of the right to play, one of the 15 GC7 indicators. CRC Article 31 establishes "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child." Although play is seen as a universal aspect of childhood around the world, defining play in order to measure it in an indicator is far from easy. The "right to play" indicator flowchart suggests asking whether there are adequate play opportunities and spaces for children, whether children get to participate in the design of such spaces, and whether certain populations of children are excluded from play. The indicator also asks whether there have been improvements in child health related to exercise, such as a reduction in obesity rates among children. These would be straightforward data-gathering questions to ask in industrialized countries, but they bear little resemblance to what play looks like for most children in developing countries.

A few playgrounds do exist in the city of Dar es Salaam, but these are typically on the grounds of private schools. A public school playground is most likely to be a disused field or lot where boys kick around a makeshift soccer ball and girls play singing games. What does the right to play mean in a developing country context where most children are expected to contribute their labor to the household from an early age? The GC7 indicator does encourage paying special attention to the problem of girls with "excessive domestic duties," but it is difficult to define what that means for girls or boys in the context of family survival from one day to the next. However, it is equally a mistake to mistranslate the lack of quantifiable playgrounds, toys, or formal opportunities for cultural enrichment as a complete lack of play on the part of children in Tanzania or other developing countries. On the issue of obesity, while it is true that childhood obesity is rising among Tanzania's small wealthy elite, malnutrition is the much more salient issue: 42% of children under 5 suffer from moderate or severe stunted growth due to malnutrition (UNICEF Tanzania 2012). One participant in the GC7 indicators project, a pediatrician, said politely of the obesity question in the right to play indicator, "some of these questions are not common to our community." The authors of the indicators accepted this challenge and changed the obe-

sity question in future versions of the indicators to include the phrase "if applicable in the context of your country."

In sum, the GC7 indicators articulated a particular cultural framework for thinking about childhood and child well-being, not all of which was either appropriate or relevant to the situation of children in Tanzania. Yet, in order to generate data comparable at the international level, it is necessary to forge ahead, attempting to classify and count across these cultural divides (Bowker and Star 1999; Espeland and Stevens 1998).

Structural Barriers to Translation

In addition to the methodological and conceptual difficulties of translation, there are structural barriers that impede the movement of indicators from one country or cultural space to another. This includes factors such as the quality and amount of administrative data collected by routine government activities, basic infrastructure issues such as access to electricity and internet service, and the political and social structures that influence everyday life. Structural barriers to translation—to the process of creating an indicator in one place in the world and then enabling its use in another place—are not often considered by the creators of indicators, but it is a key issue for users of indicators in developing countries.

For example, during the time that the GC7 indicators pilot was taking place in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam was experiencing daily rolling electricity blackouts. The pilot's coordinator had access to a generator at the international NGO offices that donated office space to the project, but many of the Tanzanian participants had limited access to electricity or the internet at their workplaces, particularly if they worked in some of the smaller and less well-funded government ministries or local Tanzanian NGOs. The creators of the indicators had assumed that all participants would have access to basic office services such as electricity, computers, internet, a phone, a printer, and a photocopier, and that the workplaces of the participants would be happy to cover these costs. However, at the mid-term meeting, many participants reported difficulty finding or copying the requested data and documents for the indicators, and many reported having to pay out of pocket for phone credit, internet access, printing, and photocopies of data. These costs were onerous for a number of participants. However, this indicators pilot bore no resemblance to the stereotypical lavishly funded development project. It ran more like a startup company, with modest costs, meetings at budget hotels, and the pilot's coordinator driving around Dar es Salaam in a late-model Toyota sedan with no air conditioning, rather than a chauffeured SUV.

Availability and accessibility of data is another major structural issue. All indicators involve a basic assumption that relevant data are available, accessible, and of acceptable

quality, and that governments will provide data to their citizens upon request. In the case of the GC7 indicators in Tanzania, data availability and accessibility were both difficult issues. One key participant, a former Tanzanian government employee who then worked for a European-funded NGO dealing with child rights, described several major problems with accessing data. First, it is difficult to know where to look for information or even to discover what information should be available. Second, accessing data requires an official letter from the director of the organization or the relevant ministry giving permission to view the data. Third, even if information exists it is not regularly updated, and fourth, the costs of accessing data are significant. He concluded that the best way to get access to data was through traditional Tanzanian networking: asking friends or relatives who work at the relevant ministry for help. A senior participant from the Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children agreed. She stated: "We stress that we really have a problem with data. We have a lot of research institutions that do surveys, for example the Demographic and Health Survey. But it is not unified. The data is collected and then it is put on the shelves or sent to donor countries. It is just scattered—especially on child rights we have very little data."

However, a Tanzanian advisor to the project and a long-time child rights activist was pleasantly surprised by how much data the teams collected. "I know our government, and I am amazed the participants have been able to collect so much information. They have done a fantastic job, they have done their best given the circumstances," he concluded. In general, it seems that the participants from the more well-funded organizations managed to produce more indicators data, since they had more time to devote to the work, more resources available, and often faced fewer structural barriers. However, some of the most thorough data was submitted by a man who worked for a small and very modestly resourced government department dealing with nutrition. Despite regular power blackouts, computers that looked to be more than a decade old, and an office stuffed floor to ceiling with precarious stacks of moldering papers, this man used his professional networks and his personal knowledge to compile a good volume of relevant, quality data for the reports on his assigned indicators, surpassing reports from some other participants who faced fewer structural constraints.

Is it possible to create indicators that will translate into any setting, regardless of structural constraints? Does recognition of linguistic, cultural, and structural differences jeopardize the ability of indicators to measure and compare phenomena from vastly different contexts? For the creators of the GC7 indicators, the difficulties with getting data were part of the process of piloting a new set of indicators. When asked about the difficulty participants were having in gathering data, one of the authors of the indicators replied: "the primary objective is determining whether or not this is a

good tool to give us the data needed. You're not going to be there to spoon-feed them every step of the way. We just put this tool out there and see whether or not it can survive on its own." Indicators largely ignore structural constraints in order to facilitate cross-country comparisons, and yet indicators are always created and used within specific cultural, linguistic, disciplinary, and structural contexts.

The GC7 indicators demonstrate that there are many challenges to measurement, and that what gets measured, what makes its way into a human rights report, and how countries and the international community come to understand human rights problems are highly uneven. New concepts and forms of behavior must be translated from everyday understandings into law and numbers, in order to become measurable and therefore visible and potentially politically salient.

Conclusion: The Future of Indicators

Indicators projects have proliferated in Tanzania and other developing countries in recent years. But what effects do they have, if any, on participants and on governments? The outcomes of the GC7 indicators project may provide some insights into the promise and pitfalls of indicators. The authors of the GC7 indicators promoted the project to the Tanzanian government as a way to improve data collection for future periodic reports to the CRC Committee, as well as being an activity that the Tanzanian government could cite in their CRC report as evidence of their commitment to child rights. The project was also seen as a way to build awareness of child rights and child development issues among participants from various ministries and civil society organizations and to build capacity on human rights reporting within and across sectors. When the leaders of the initiative presented their accomplishments to the CRC Committee in Geneva, they stressed the value of the interministerial communication that they had established.

However, when Tanzania submitted its 2012 report to the CRC committee, indicators were hardly mentioned at all in the report (United Republic of Tanzania 2012). Despite all the discussions about the importance of indicators, neither the GC7 indicators nor any of several other child-related indicators projects that took place in Tanzania during the reporting period (2005–11) were mentioned by name in the report. In the over 100-page report, indicators are mentioned only a few times in a very general way, as, for example: "maternal height is a good indicator of women at nutritional risk" (United Republic of Tanzania 2012:71).

Why were specific indicators projects not mentioned in the CRC report? It is difficult to know why Tanzanian ministries would devote personnel and time to participating in various indicators projects, only to not mention them or seek credit for this work in their reports to the CRC Committee or other treaty bodies. Tanzania's 2012 CRC report focuses

heavily on areas in which they have made measurable progress, such as the achievement of a 40% reduction in mortality in children under 5 in the past decade (Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics and ICF Macro 2011; United Republic of Tanzania 2012). The under-5 mortality statistic tells a powerful story of progress on its own. But when a single positive statistic on child mortality is placed alongside many other data points in an indicator, it tends to recede among all the other areas still in need of urgent improvement. For countries like Tanzania that are trying to show donors and the world community a story of development and progress, indicators can have the effect of obscuring the good outcomes amid a flood of data.

With specific regard to human rights indicators, there may also be tension between the pre-indicators style of human rights advocacy, which focused on bringing a lot of attention to a single issue, such as violence against women, and indicators that are based on quantification and compilation of many issues. The former approach sought to mobilize governments and civil society to push for change on one issue, whereas human rights indicators do not focus on a single issue but on a set of interrelated issues.

The GC7 indicators are just one example of the sometimes uneasy and always complex relationship between indicators created in the global North and their intended users in the global South. Does participating in indicators projects help developing countries to build capacity to collect data and create indicators that measure issues important to them? Or are they just harvesting data for export? One participant in the indicators pilot, a man from a well-resourced Tanzanian NGO, articulated this tension between data collectors and users very well: "We Tanzanians are like farmers. We grow the data, we harvest it for you out in the country, we bring it here to market in Dar es Salaam, and then you export the data, you take it to Geneva and you make it into indicators."

This metaphor of data as an agricultural product, harvested and then exported overseas to be refined into indicators, speaks to the problem of "statistical autonomy" that has emerged as a key development issue in recent years. The idea of statistical autonomy has been promoted by the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, which was established in 2007 by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. The Ibrahim Index includes 88 measures of good governance, in the areas of safety and rule of law, participation and human rights, sustainable economic opportunity, and human development.

One of the goals of the Ibrahim Index is to draw attention to "the paucity of African data and the need for statistical autonomy within African countries" (IIAG 2012:12). Its authors argue that "one of Africa's biggest challenges going forward is to master its own robust statistical system. Political sovereignty begins with data autonomy" (12). Tanzania ranked tenth best overall in the 2012 rankings (out of 52 countries), and were ranked ninth best in statistical

capacity with a score of 75 out of 100. Although Tanzania ranks relatively well in statistical capacity compared with other African countries, most government statistical offices, including that of Tanzania, lack the resources and personnel to produce quality data. In a recent study of African statistical offices, including Tanzania's, economic historian Morten Jerven argues that much of the data produced in Africa "has taken on a dangerously misleading air of accuracy" and that African governments "are not able to make informed decisions because existing data are too weak or the data they need do not exist" (Jerven 2013:xi). Indeed, as participants in the GC7 indicators project discovered, Tanzania still has some very significant issues with data availability and accessibility. But as statistical capacity continues to improve, might Tanzania and other developing countries turn to creating their own indicators?

There is already some evidence of a turn toward homegrown indicators in Africa. One example is the Africa Leadership Scorecard, created in 2011 by a group of African journalists working for the Nation Media Group, the largest independent media company in east and central Africa (Nation Media Group 2013). It is a meta-indicator that includes weighted scores for other governance indicators, including the Ibrahim Index, the Economist Democracy Index, the Press Freedom Index, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, the UN Human Development Index, and the NMG Political Index (created by African journalists). Tanzania's President Kikwete received a grade of C. The African Leadership Scorecard, although only in its second year, is an interesting example of how data from both the global North and global South along with indicator technologies are being used by African experts to provide information and analysis on issues of importance to their audiences.

However, given the difficulties associated with indicators we have discussed above, is a movement toward homegrown indicators necessarily a positive development? Locally created indicators certainly have the potential to obscure issues that are vitally important but hard to measure in the same way that global indicators tend to. Indicators that are culturally specific enough to translate seamlessly into a particular context lose their power of commensuration. A paradox of indicators is that in order to be globally commensurate, they cannot be rooted in local contexts, but in order to accurately reflect local situations, they need to be. Similarly, globally produced indicators are likely to ignore problems of translation of the kind we have discussed here, but locally produced ones are unable to paint a globally comparative picture. As indicators continue to proliferate around the world, the question is not whether new types of indicators and new technologies of measurement will emerge. The question is whether the indicators of the future, particularly those locally produced, will come closer to delivering on the promise of indicators to promote human rights, good governance, and development.

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Comments

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This essay offers insightful ethnographic insights into how the production of human rights indicators falters in translating lives into numbers. Merry and Wood interrogate the increasing colonization of the field of human rights by techniques of measurement and performance modeled in the images of "business management, development economics, public health, education, and government administration." The production of human rights indicators is then linked to monitoring, and evaluation of compliance of international law and conventions. The audit culture in the field of human rights is increasingly imbricated in decisions about what is counted, how life must be measured, and how indicators make rightlessness visible. Underlying this is the pervasiveness of the idea that for rights to matter these must be measurable. Often activist discourses are made fragile when unable to muster numerical narratives, leading to denial of welfare or aid. Techniques of measurement and performance link human rights to projects of *good* governance. The cunning of the apparatus of *good* governance, however, rests in the collapsing of languages of social suffering to language of indicators.

Tracking the movement of the global demand for indicators to the local production of human rights indicators meant documenting the electricity blackout, searching for photocopying facilities, longing for phone or internet connectivity, or relying on personal networks to access data. The authors observe that the production of indicators or the international standards of what constitutes adequate data assumes that all countries possess equal resources to produce complicated and expensive data. The global standards of what must be measured, however, often are incommensurable and entail several different kinds of translation.

We know that measurement entails interpretation. Translation of global standards into the local entails translations of concepts, and also strategies of making disparate things commensurate. In the authors' words, "translation moves something from one frame of reference to another, while commensuration sits several different things side by side in one frame of reference and seeks to add them together on the basis of their similarities while ignoring their differences" Further, this translation from the global to the local is relatively easier for those things to which are attached histories of measurement and comparison. Presumably colonial modes of measuring things are constitutive of such numerical histories. In particular, the authors argue that those things without enumerative histories are stubbornly resistant to translation. The institution of difference in that which can be counted and that which resists enumeration means certain kinds of rights become visible and important to address over others. In the authors' words, "[t]he effect of new measurement systems is, therefore, to move things from the domain of the everyday and the natural to that of the countable and measurable and therefore publicly recognized." This ethnography of the GC7 indicators on producing data in compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) describes how categorization of children's lives or their everyday lives such as a child's notion of play gets lost in the process of cultural translation. Yet the ethnography also seems to suggest that these are adult categories that imagine how the right to play finds voice in everyday and exceptional contexts.

Merry (2006b) has argued that "the process of translation is fundamental to the circulation and implementation of human rights concepts around the world." This means recognizing how different kinds of translations—linguistic, numerical, structural, cultural, institutional—mediated by local elites operate in multiple fields of power. It also means analyzing manuals, flow charts, the sifting of data into relevant and *outcome* documents, and counting things that can be measured. This leads to the paradox that where there are no centralized mechanisms of monitoring things or when it is culturally or politically inappropriate to name certain violations, these unfamiliar or difficult-to-measure violations are not counted. The politics of what is not counted equally provides a critical commentary on the fragility of translation of everyday life into rights indicators. The authors conclude by arguing that whether or not indicators are produced globally or locally, the real question is whether human rights indicators hold the potential to fulfill the promise of "human rights, good governance, and development."

While proffering a critique of the production, circulation, and imposition of human rights indicators, Merry and Wood do not interrogate sufficiently what is at stake in the promise of projects of *good* governance that are not necessarily concerned with *just* governance. Nor are the global numerical narratives of human rights indicators framed as a vernacular that demands specific forms of techniques, learning, training,

and proficiencies. The histories of things translated as indicators equally entail translation between different kinds of temporalities. In legally plural contexts, different kinds of temporalities may inhabit life simultaneously, while languages of *good* governance may be deployed by different and even opposing political projects at the same time.

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In their essay "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan" (1981), Callon and Latour puzzle about the ways that local assemblages become macro-scaled phenomena—big leviathans, like the state, the national economy, the market, or globalization. How do so many particular associations and practices become sufficiently uniform, stable, and regular to appear as the ready-made building blocks of macro-objects? How is the appearance of homothetic scaling, from the local to the global, produced?

Callon and Latour's answer develops the concepts of "translation" and "blackboxing." "Translation" occurs wherever through negotiation, persuasion, or calculation, one actor (human or nonhuman) is conferred the authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force. In other words, one actor (A) represents and enrolls the other actor (B) into A's network of meanings and actions. Seen temporally in their formative moments, these translations are often crude: for A to represent B, much meaning and context is sacrificed, and many doubts remain about its authority, efficacy, and desirability. Coercion and unpersuasiveness are palpable at these moments. But translations become powerful to the extent that these uncertainties become marginal. If the messiness of translation *in statu nascendi* can be shut away in black boxes, the translations enable the successful creation of macro-objects. Problems of inadequate information or incomplete commensuration cease to undermine the apparent solidity of the actor-object created, and its agency can be magnified by enrollment in other networks.

In their rich and lucid paper, Merry and Wood provide an incisive account of the messiness of translation at a key moment in the generation of a global fact: numerical indicators about the state of child rights in Tanzania. They use the term "translation" in a different way from Callon and Latour, but I suggest that the underlying phenomena that Merry and Wood capture is what Callon and Latour describe. I will focus on two of Merry and Wood's insights in order to consider how their study provokes reflection on the role of quantification in producing a seemingly homogenous global space populated by apparently stable macro-realities called (inter alia) "compliance with a positive agenda for children's rights" or "the state of child's rights in Tanzania."

First, Merry and Wood demonstrate that measurement and quantification are social, iterative, and power-saturated exercises. That some objects seem inherently measurable while others seem uncountable reflects neither the object's intrinsic properties nor methodological limits but whether there already exists an information infrastructure that has "preformatted" categories, data, and concepts in order render them countable. National income appears to us today to be easily countable across countries (subject to a few technical problems) and thoroughly plausible for the purpose of comparison. But it has only become so because the social, historical, and resource-related perplexities, described by Merry and Wood in relation to "counting" child rights' performance, have been "blackboxed" through standardization, homogenization, and relegation of problems of incommensurability to irrelevance (Speich 2011). Over time, "a stable epistemic environment [concerning national income accounting] resulted, in which economic facts about wealth and poverty could travel as immutable mobiles in space" (Speich 2011:20). Merry and Wood allow us to witness and recall in essential detail how much must be blackboxed before a discrete object called "indicators of children's rights in Tanzania" can be produced and become part of a frame of action.

Second, Merry and Wood observe that the quantification of human rights concepts requires "bringing distinct professional discourses together" and "collecting and organizing data that fit into . . . global templates." What does not fit becomes uncountable and potentially invisible; those dimensions of professional discourses not amenable to the logics demanded by quantification may be excluded. All of this conduces to the production of a "global abstraction" that engenders knowledge premised on global scale comparisons. A single global plane populated by discreet knowledge objects stripped of particular histories and particular politics is a powerful frame of action. It is of course a *trompe l'oeil*, just as any panorama is. But as the development and use of national income accounting suggest, the creation and stabilization of global abstractions in the twentieth century were intimately enrolled with other agendas: policy interventions in the modern welfare state, the emergence of development economics as a discipline, and policy interventions in newly decolonized states (Speich 2011). Merry and Wood suggest that locally produced indicators *may* form a kind of counter-knowledge in relation to the panoramas underwritten by global abstractions, one that reopens black boxes that were previously sealed. They may be right, although it is too soon to tell, as they acknowledge.

Because the article grapples with an emerging phenomenon (human rights indicators), it remains tentative about the possible effects of quantification and measurement. The authors note that in Tanzania's reports to the CRC, little use was made of this laboriously constructed data. But human rights indicators have also become enrolled in *other* ambitious efforts at constructing global abstractions, such as quantifications of state fragility and governance (Bhuta 2012,

2015) in order to better compare, diagnose, and intervene in political disorders in developing states. Merry and Wood's work may in the future help us defuse and disassemble this towering edifice of black boxes.

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For better or worse, we live in the Age of Indices. As scholars have told us, social life becomes transformed through the fraught processes of measurement; the results then justify their own production; and then, as Giddens might have put it, these results not only structure the institutions (local, national, global) that demand them, but as Merry and Wood argue, they also come to partly define the boundaries of social and institutional reality itself, since what is not measured is not, *ipso facto*, measurable, and what is not measurable does not, in important ways, exist.

In fact, Merry and Wood's article reveals a double-layered ontological process at work. As they show, through their ethnographic and theoretical analysis of a human rights indicators regime that affected Tanzania in particular ways, it is not simply the problem of quantification that is implicated here—that is, the processes through which international and transnational elites within global North institutions demand the production of indicators as a result of what we can only imagine is the absolutely earnest desire to convert general human rights strategies and norms into real practices on the ground that shape real social, political, and economic change with lasting and progressive consequences.

Rather, it is also, perhaps more troublingly, the problem of what might be called "trans-categorizing" that is at stake. Here, once the complicated meanings of childhood, child well-being, and, in some ways, the performance of kinship itself, have been winnowed and sifted, translated into the languages of international measurement, and collated into documentary and institutional forms that can—and, in most cases, *must*—be circulated, another, somewhat distinct, process of translation and transformation takes place. This is what Merry and Wood describe as "commensuration"—the forging of new categories for comparison that are created through yet additional levels of "simplification and decontextualization," as they aptly put it. So we have both vertical and horizontal axes along which the arguably incommensurate is shorn of its thickness and depth, bundled together with other, equally shallow, incommensurate extractions, and then sent along its way to become commensurable (*not* commensurate) fodder in an international market in so-called data, to be consumed hungrily by Northern elites (and their Southern counterparts and collaborators—see Merry 2006) as necessary sustenance for their bureaucratic existence.

But what, we might ask, does any of this have to do with changing for the better the life conditions of children in Tanzania? As Merry and Wood suggest, the farther along both of these vertical and horizontal axes the translated data-as-indicators of social life must travel, the less likely it is these indicators will be capable of eventually grounding actual processes of progressive change for Tanzanian children as contemplated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is another implication of what Merry and Wood call the “paradox of measurement”: the more “indicator culture” (Merry 2015) comes to dominate and define the parameters of bureaucratic action within the major institutions that are charged with creating and implementing social policies (whether international, regional, or national), the less likely it is that these policies will fulfill their objectives. And since many of the most vulnerable countries cannot afford to opt out of the global indicator culture, this means that the possibilities for real change (at least driven by the national level) are becoming more circumscribed as they are by definition becoming more remote from their initial referents, as we might say.

Given the hegemony and indeed disciplinary pervasiveness of indicator culture, it is not surprising that Merry and Wood hesitate to suggest clear alternatives, or at least ones that would have any purchase with the relevant actors. The authors do allude to the possibility that the structural problems with the process of commensuration might be overcome with greater attention to the implications of translation (perhaps guided by their article and current and future work in the same line) and the linkages between measurement and social life thereby tightened. They even seem—perhaps ironically—to slip into a bit of indicator culture themselves when explaining why Tanzania was an odd choice for the indicators pilot study: “the vast majority of children live in households subsisting on less than \$2 a day, and face numerous problems with health, education, and poverty.” One imagines that the UNICEF study that is the basis for this comparison was anchored in indicators in all their troubling and reductive glory. But how does one make a general comparison about Tanzania (i.e., comparative with other countries, whether in Africa or elsewhere) without the direct or indirect use of indicators? This is perhaps a final implication of Merry and Wood’s important intervention: that the language of indicator culture has become a lingua franca that one can reveal, critique, and bracket, but not avoid entirely.

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Sally Engle Merry and Summer Wood have written a smart, thoughtful article on the challenges confronting policy mak-

ers who seek to develop quantitative indicators to monitor compliance in human rights. Drawing on a case study of a pilot test of indicators of children’s rights in Tanzania, they examine five different types of translation problems encountered in such efforts: quantitative, conceptual, linguistic, cultural, and structural. A key contribution of the article is the naming and discussion of these types of translation, which will be useful for scholars, policy makers, and activists working on (or challenging) the development and deployment of human rights indicators elsewhere in the world.

Despite its analytic usefulness, however, the concept of “translation” has its limits, especially in the ways that the seemingly neutral term masks the play of power in producing these “problems.” The authors and, more poignantly, their interlocutors, mention some of these dynamics in the text, but these relations of power are not explicitly engaged in the analysis or reflected in the term “translation.” Given the limits of space, I will briefly discuss three instances where I believe more explicit attention to how power shapes and is produced through the process of “translation” would be theoretically worthwhile. My purpose is to encourage the authors to rethink their use of “translation” to capture the challenges they document and to highlight and underline what is at stake for the kinds of people I work with in Tanzania—poor, rural, semiliterate men and women—when the complexities of their lives are “translated” into measurable units to be counted, compared, and, ultimately, criticized.

First, as the authors discuss, the effort to develop indicators is taking place in a world of continuing inequities of economic resources, political power, and social capital between the global North and the global South. Such inequalities are present in the very origins of the project. The desire for indicators emanates from experts in the global North seeking easier methods to measure and compare compliance with human rights protocols. Indicators are in no way a priority of the people in Tanzania they are trying to “measure,” many of whom are struggling to feed their families and care for their children on an average of \$2 a day. Nor are they a priority of the educated professionals working for NGOs and government ministries, who try to do their jobs despite the challenges of rolling electricity blackouts, low pay, bad roads, and bureaucratic thickets. The stark divide between the goals and resources of the data “experts” and the data “collectors” (much less the data collectors and the rural and urban poor), and the echoes with long colonial histories of extraction and exploitation, are captured in the moving comments of one Tanzanian NGO worker: “We are like farmers. We grow the data, we harvest it for you out in the country, we bring it here to market in Dar es Salaam, and then you report the data, you take it to Geneva and you make it into indicators.”

Second, the very purpose of the project, to create numbers to “simplify” and “decontextualize” the measurement of poverty and thus to “streamline the process of monitoring compliance with human rights treaties” is an assertion that the

priorities and worldview of the global North trump those of people in Tanzania and elsewhere in the global South. The urge to remove “context” and “complexity” from the experience of poverty, to reduce the struggle to survive to just a number, has numerous effects. It diminishes the lives and struggles of the poor, obscures attention to the structural forms of injustice that perpetuate and exacerbate economic and political inequality, and thus, I would argue, undermines effective interventions. To collect data on childhood obesity in a country where malnutrition is rampant is not just a problem of “translation,” but of ignorance, of disregarding the specificities of how poverty is lived and expressed in the global South.

Finally, the development of these indicators enforces the power of experts from the global North to impose their views of who a child is, how that child should be raised, what that child should be able to do, and so forth. As the authors discuss, a focus on the “rights” of a child is not the same thing as attention to his or her “well-being.” To replace language about “moral accountability” and “responsibility” with the word “rights” is not just a poor translation or a different “frame of reference,” but the willful insistence on a different set of meanings and priorities.

These examples demonstrate some of the ways that relations of power have shaped the purpose, process, and outcomes of such projects. Numbers, concepts, culture, and language are not being “translated,” I suggest, but forced upon (and challenged) by Tanzanians. Perhaps the term “impositions” better captures these dynamics than “translations”?

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Global Standards and Local Measures

Not all that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts. Sally Engle Merry and Summer Wood present a variation on that famous Einstein quote. They propose the paradox of measurement: “to make something known it must be countable, but if it has not already been translated in commensurable and quantifiable terms, it is difficult to count and may remain unnoticed and uncounted.” Merry and Wood’s modification makes the key point clearer—Einstein’s wise warning will be ignored. Our picture of the world is shaped by the ways we make the world legible.

It is harder to prove how the interpretation and evaluation of words, sentences, and arguments may yield evidence that is more solid than numbers—and it may be difficult to demonstrate how numbers, statistics, and indexes may prove to

be less robust than words, but is certainly possible. And it is necessary—otherwise very important information will go missed.

This point is well made by Sally Engle Merry and Summer Wood. They provide a thoroughly researched case study that is thoughtfully linked to a growing body of theoretical thinking about quantification. Not so long a time ago, in this journal, Merry herself issued a call for research, especially calling for ethnography of global indicators (Merry 2011: S85): “Doing an ethnography of indicators means examining the history of the creation of an indicator and its underlying theory, observing expert group meetings and international discussions where the terms of the indicator are debated and defined, interviewing expert statisticians and other experts about the meaning and the process of producing indicators, observing data collection processes, and examining the ways indicators affect decision making and public perceptions.” It is very suitable that Merry and Wood have met this call with a study of how human rights are measured. Their concern is not simply with data quality or commensuration. They study the process of collecting and analyzing the data locally in Tanzania, and how these data make their way to global reports on human rights in Geneva—to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Merry and Wood examine this as five types of translation, which add complexity to the process of using a global standard to say something useful about a phenomena in a specific location.

Quantification is translating something inherently qualitative into a number. Conceptual translation describes the theoretical coherence in the measurement process. Linguistic translation may seem mundane, but translating a survey from English to Kiswahili and keeping the same meaning is not straightforward, and is inherently linked to the cultural translation. Finally, structural translation is less recognized. One usually assumes administrative equivalency across all nations of the world—but while primary school enrollment data may be readily available at the fingertip of an administrator in Sweden, it may require a lengthy and expensive survey data collection process to get similar information from Malawi.

Similar analytical angles framed my own study of how the global standard for recording income and growth—GDP—was measured locally, and how these metrics traveled from national statistical offices and were disseminated in global databases (Jerven 2013). One finding was that the distance between the observer and the observed has grown with the availability of global data sets. Scholars may hesitate to trust official statistics from Angola and may feel comfortable using World Bank data on Angola—yet the World Bank has no independent data collection capacity. The processes of translation that Merry and Wood elucidate are often neglected completely by data users. Readily downloadable observations may seem like functionally equivalent facts—though they are in reality guesses with considerable difference in accuracy and provenance.

In the previous round of the Millennium Development Goals it was agreed that the progress in development should be targeted and measured according to 8 goals, 18 targets, and 48 indicators. The process of agreeing upon the post-2015 goals is not yet concluded, but the most recent list from the Open Working Group includes 17 goals and 169 targets (UN 2014). It would be desirable that such debates took more notice of a growing literature highlighting the complexity of adopting such global indicators.

Scholars pay attention to defining concepts but devote comparatively little time to analyzing the process of creating numbers that represent them in databases. Decisions about what to measure, who to count, and by whose authority the final number is selected do matter. Merry and Wood point the way forward for scholars who already are critical of how numbers are used in both scholarship and policy and show how one can use critical skills to further engage with the numbers.

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In the past decade or so, there has been a definitive turn toward indicators in human rights contexts (Rosga and Satterthwaite 2009). Merry and Wood demonstrate why ethnography is a crucial tool for understanding the dangers inherent in this desire to quantify rights. Some of the perils discussed in this article have been analyzed by Merry in an earlier article (2011), as well as by Fukuda-Parr and Yamin (2013) and Rosga and Satterthwaite (2009). However, Merry and Wood make unique contributions by distilling insights drawn from their ethnographic research. Here, they focus on the process by which a matrix of rights-inflected indicators created by experts far from the places where such indicators will be applied are translated into locally legible metrics. The authors' ethnographic descriptions yield analytical insights not available from other vantage points. While others have examined the processes of quantitative and conceptual transformation at work in global indicators projects (Davis et al. 2012; Fukuda-Parr and Yamin 2013), Merry and Wood sharpen these insights and add new dimensions that have escaped scholarly attention. Their observation that human rights indicators projects entail five kinds of translation—quantitative, conceptual, linguistic, cultural, and structural—is a major contribution to the discussion.

One element not examined is that of *legal* translation. Human rights law, like much of international law, is written at a level of abstraction that allows—and requires—national and local translation. Merry has done path-breaking work on the vernacularization of such norms, through which local

elites and activists translate international rights into locally meaningful discourses and symbols (Merry 2006a, 2006b). In this article, Merry and Wood suggest that human rights indicators, like their parent norms, are subject to multidirectional translation. It would be useful to observe the legal aspects of this translation as well. While the article engages with key human rights legal concepts (duty bearers, rights holders), it does not fully tackle the question of exactly how the indicators chosen are related to the legal standards set out in the Children's Rights Convention (CRC). An area where this issue presented itself was in the discussion of the measurement difficulties entailed in "human rights" elements of the CRC, as distinct from the "child development" elements. This distinction is analytically helpful in distinguishing elements that are commonly enumerated and those which are not. However, all of the areas under examination in the indicators project are at least nominally human rights elements, having been drawn from a legally binding treaty. The fact that some rights (the right to health, for example) are easier to measure than others (the right to play, for example) is closely linked not only to the fact that related concepts may or may not have been quantified in the past, but also to the degree of elaboration these norms have had by the relevant treaty body and other legal institutions.

Indeed, legal translation is occurring all along the indicators pipeline, whether spoken or unspoken. When indicators purport to act as metrics for treaty compliance, there are inherent changes or slippages, from the norm as articulated in the convention itself to the data sets chosen to function as indicators to monitor compliance. The process of legal translation, whereby experts examine available or potentially collectible data and ask which best captures the meaning of a given provision, involves a transformation that has legal import and would presumably involve legal reasoning and analysis. As Merry and Wood demonstrate, there is more work entailed in identifying appropriate indicators for treaty provisions whose core elements have not been subject to quantification in the past—whether in human rights or development settings. Measuring the right to play is harder, in part because it has been done less often, than measuring the right to health. However, even indicators that measure concepts that are well known in the development context, such as breast-feeding rates, are part of a legal translation process whereby they are made to relate to a specific treaty provision concerning the right to health. The existence—or lack—of discussion about the legal valence of these choices among indicators is itself an important facet of the indicators project that could be usefully subject to ethnographic research.

Such research could examine questions including the following: To what extent do experts drafting indicators in Geneva consult interpretations of specific terms by the CRC, its sister human rights bodies, and regional human rights courts? Are human rights legal experts in the room for these discussions? Once the international indicators reach the

"field" in a specific country, are local jurists consulted for their understanding of what the "right to play" means? How are local jurisprudence, judicial personnel, and legal experts integrated into the process? Is this a legally inflected discussion at all? To the extent there is little or no engagement with legal analysis or formal law, what do these gaps tell us about the human rights indicators project? Ethnographic attention to this aspect could add a great deal to the discussion.

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The Mystical Force of Commensuration

Sally Merry and Summer Wood contribute to a growing anthropological literature that analyzes the ways in which audit culture, accountability, and quantification enter into various cultural domains, and with what consequences. Their focus is on indicators of human rights performance and compliance, and the process of producing these indicators about children's rights in Tanzania. This process involves both translation and commensuration, and in the words of one individual who developed the indicators, "if we can make [them] work in Tanzania, they should be able to be used anywhere in the world." Evidently, if indicators can achieve their aim of accurately measuring compliance and progress in that out-of-the-way African place, then the rest of the world should be a piece of (quantifiable) cake.

Human rights discourse occupies a tremendous amount of "airspace" in global politics, where it has become the dominant discourse of justice. Human rights have tremendous global currency, a term I use purposefully. As currency, human rights offer the promise of universal standards, commensurability, and a measure of justice via the harmonizing or "complementarity" of domestic and international laws and legal cultures. The exchange of data and indicators, however, occurs in an unequal marketplace in which the less powerful may have a considerable investment in "gaming the system," "cooking the books," or, as they say in Peru, "maquillando los datos" (making up, as in embellishing with cosmetics, the data). The story of indicators is the story of contemporary processes of governing, as well as the story of subversion, delight, and desire. The indicators are performative, and so is the production of the data, which serve as their grist. Shame in a lack of data, pride in its abundance, and glee when the grist is transformed into indicators that, well, indicate that a rival country has been found quantifiably more corrupt. Indicators are clearly more than tools

for measuring the world: they are "actants" with agency and complicated social and political lives. Reading this article, one is struck by their symbolic power; their ability to legitimize certain practices while condemning others; their ability to create knowledge and structure policy making and interventions. And by their ability to provoke considerable unease.

As the authors note, indicators are one technology of commensuration, and what has been measured once is predictive of which social phenomena will be measured again. This is the "paradox of measurement": "Issues uncounted in the past tend to remain ignored or poorly counted in the future." Indicators construct grids of intelligibility, which in turn produce silences and erasures, blind spots in our collective range of vision. In these brief comments, I focus on the mystical force of commensuration.

In her trenchant critique of late liberalism, E. Povinelli (2002) has attended to the emergence and maintenance of radical worlds in the shadow of the liberal diaspora. A cornerstone of liberal democracies is faith in the public sphere of communicative reason, and the possibility of nonviolent commensuration in the service of tolerance and a facile politics of recognition. From this perspective, morally and epistemologically divergent life worlds can be categorically lined up in a series of (false) equivalences and the conceptual gaps technocratically foreclosed via peaceful adherence to procedure. Thus the human rights indicators arrive absent their own history, and what has been commensurated before will be commensurated again. It is simply a matter of piloting the training manuals, explaining the global templates with a slight cultural inflection, and of foregrounding similarities while ignoring differences. But what is one to do with the surplus of meaning? The default category may be *inconceivable*.

In my research on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Peru (Theidon 2012), I explored how "coding for trauma" served as a technology of commensuration. The team in charge of translating victims' testimonies confronted a complex array of ailments that Quechua speakers associated with the political violence and its legacies. These ailments frequently had their etiology in a complex moral world of victims, perpetrators, and those who blurred the great divide. The translators (native Quechua speakers themselves) had been warned during training sessions that peasants are "very imaginative" and would tell them "all sorts of fabulous things." They were "cautioned not to fall for all of that." When they pressed the trainers for guidance on what to do with soul loss, witchcraft, and toxic memories, the trainers assured them "those things are inconceivable. They don't exist." The translators were instructed to code all of these ailments as trauma.

What motivates people to commensurate? On the one hand, truth commissions are aware they are producing final reports for various audiences. One audience is the "international community" and this is an incentive to employ key

diacritics of veracity. Individual testimonies provide the raw “memory material” that is processed and from which a collective narrative is forged. In an effort to produce “intelligible results,” there is a move to technologies of commensuration: standardized software programs used to analyze data, linear chronologies, tables and charts, quantifiable violations, dates, times—and trauma. As a technology of commensuration, the discourse of trauma is globally recognized and can “authorize the real.” Thus locally salient categories of affliction, which may reference radically different understandings of etiology, are coded as trauma. These strategies are part of the globalized transitional justice industry, and are marshaled in the interest of producing findings that are both defensible and that allow a final report “to speak” beyond the context in which it was produced. For the Peruvian TRC, it allowed the final report to translate “inconceivable things” into science and thereby authorize the suffering and the text.

And for those who gave testimonies? “Talking trauma” wove its ways into daily life as well. Despite omnipresent criticisms of their health posts, Quechua-speaking peasants were not rejecting medical care, *per se*. Claiming trauma was in part a demand for services. Talking trauma was one way of constructing the intervenable subject—individually and collectively. Interventions and their subjects must fit within a modernist paradigm: angry ancestors no, trauma yes. The modern subject of suffering is traumatized. Talking trauma is a way of making oneself, and one’s suffering, legible. The mystical force of commensuration lies in its capacity to obligate those who inhabit inconceivable symbolic registers to explain themselves in another idiom, and to bear the burden of commensuration on its very grounds of operation.

So what is the anthropologist to do? If one can speak of an indicator culture—or an audit culture of which indicators are one expression—then one can attend to the emergent, contested, and contingent. We can insist on messier stories, those that disrupt the indicators and the narratives of peaceful progress that they construct. We can expose the velvet-gloved violence of commensuration, and perhaps achieve a greater measure of justice for the people with whom we work.

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The specific ways indicators are woven into the social fabric of the places where they are used remain largely unexplored in the growing literature on indicators as technologies of global governance (Merry et al. 2012). This article contributes to filling that void, by focusing on the central theme of *translation*—a process in which concepts (such as child development theories) and local realities (children’s play in

Tanzania) are expressed in a numeric language that can be understood by the consumers of the indicator.

There are, however, two different moments to this process. The first is the translation of local realities and nonlegal concepts into the language of human rights. This translation implies the simplification of such concepts and realities, and their possible distortion, in order to fit the clear-cut category of “rights.” The second moment implies translating these (already simplified) legal concepts into indicators. Many of the dynamics triggered by the GC7 indicators project in Tanzania (in particular, those derived from “conceptual,” “linguistic,” and “cultural” translations) seem to be related to that first moment, and not to the second. They seem to be, not a distinctive dimension of the use of quantitative technologies of governance, but rather an effect of framing a complex issue (such as child development) in terms of “rights.” Even if no indicators were involved, one could expect the same sort of conceptual, linguistic, and cultural issues to emerge.

In contrast, the issues emerging from the gathering of data required by GC7 indicators seem to be more distinctively related to the use of indicators. In this regard, Merry and Wood shed light on a dynamic path-dependence mechanism, which is triggered by indicators and their specific data requirements. As savvy activists know well, indicators are useful to gather attention and channel resources to specific problems; thus, the issues that are given more attention today are those that are quantified. But the Tanzanian case shows that the issues that are more likely to be quantified today are those that have been quantified before—for example, breast-feeding. As a result, problems that are too new or too complex to be quantified (e.g., the right of children to participate in household decision making) not only remain in the dark today, but become increasingly less likely to be taken up by decision makers in the future, because they become increasingly less likely to be quantified. This dynamic path dependence may suggest that using indicators as a tool for policy may tend, in and of itself, to perpetuate the status quo, even if the actual content of the indicator is progressive, or even if the indicator is homegrown, and not the imposition of an international institution.

Two further dimensions can be gleaned in the article’s rich account of the data-gathering process. The indicator is not only the end result of multiple processes of translation (a “thing”), but also creates a space where multiple social interactions occur. These interactions certainly involve the creator of the indicator and its potential users, but they also involve the staff that is gathering the data in Dar es Salaam (i.e., turn came from different ministries), international experts (such as the members of the CRC), and even the academics that comment on the indicator and do the ethnography of their deployment. Regardless of their area of expertise or their institutional affiliation, all these people are forced to speak a common numeric language, established by the particular indicator. In a way, a shared space is created. In this

common language, possible tensions may be expressed; contestations may emerge. If the indicator becomes important enough, certain groups may want to change it—include an issue that they feel has been wrongly excluded, or exclude issues wrongly included. All these interactions are political. Paradoxically, then, indicators trigger a process of translation that simplifies and depoliticizes complex social phenomena; and at the same time, they create a political space, where actors that would not have met otherwise start to interact on the basis of a common language, and a particular policy goal.

The remaining question is whether the participants of this community believe that, once built, the indicator actually reflects the reality of children in Tanzania. Considering the multiple challenges in translation described in the article, it seems possible that they remain skeptical. The indicator is a version of reality created for a specific purpose (in this case, the report to the CRC), that participants acting in the space created by it agree is not “real.” This lack of reality, though, is irrelevant: what matters is that the specific version of reality created by the indicator serves its purpose. The test for the reality created by indicators is not accuracy, but functionality. In this case, the indicator failed: the state did not use it in its report to the CRC. But, despite this failure, the very process of developing the indicator and gathering the data seems to have facilitated the creation of an instrumentally defined reality concerning children in Tanzania, which now coexists with, and influences, other descriptions of reality.

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Merry and Wood's fascinating article provides a trenchant critique of the development of children's rights indicators in Tanzania. The article significantly advances the established anthropological literature on human rights epistemology (or, “how human rights knows”), which hitherto has focused on problems of translation (Pitarch 2008), the instrumentalism of legal knowledge (Riles 2006), the reliance on statistical models of violations by truth and reconciliation commissions (Buur 2001; Ross 2003; Wilson 2001) and the startling omissions of human rights reporting (Wilson 1997). Crucially, Merry and Wood identify the mechanisms of translation and commensuration through which local knowledge and practice are rendered visible and measurable, extracted from the national context and then mapped onto a global template.

Particularly intriguing is the discussion of the translation of rights terminology and the use of the word “haki,” which sent me back to Clifford Geertz's (1983) brilliant elucidation of the socially constitutive character of the Islamic legal-

religious term *haqq*. Merry and Wood also describe how rights constitute a blueprint of and for social reality and coin a new expression, the “paradox of measurement,” in which that which has already been measured holds prominence, and that which is not remains invisible. This valuable analytical term can be added to another familiar paradox of human rights, namely that the institutions of nation-state governments most empowered to uphold and protect the human rights of their citizens are also the most likely to abuse them. The international framework of human rights is patently full of such paradoxes, and anthropologists such as Merry and Wood are at the forefront identifying their epistemological dimensions.

This research is not just relevant to the anthropology of human rights, but also has profound implications for the anthropology of international and local governance more generally. It extends the long-standing historical and anthropological study of the rise of the modern, liberal bureaucratic state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its desire to regulate the health, morality, and education of society, all of which called forth a new infrastructure to generate metrics for population censuses and new demographic categories (Hunt 1999; Kertzer and Arel 2002). The present imperative to fashion international human rights indicators replicates in many ways these earlier social regulatory efforts, with the main difference being that in the era of twenty-first-century international governance, the architecture of knowledge and control is created by international actors and agencies that are distant and external to the local and regional setting.

The ethnography and analysis in this article might usefully be extended to reflect upon broader issues in the anthropological study of global policy. First, the article mentions that the early childhood rights indicators include a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures, and the reader would benefit hearing more about how those distinctive elements were combined (or not, as the case may be) in their case study. Drawing out the implications of their argument, what role, if any, do they see for anthropological and ethnographic research in cross-country comparisons in human rights? Would they replace indicators with ethnographies? What relationship do they envisage between ethnographic and statistical approaches? Implicit in the critique of quantitative measures for children's rights is the assumption that in generating statistical measurements, the translation between conceptual frameworks is more dubious, and the gulf between local priorities and those of foreign scholars and consultants is deeper than in purely qualitative research. If that is a fair inference, then many anthropologists have contended (at least since the 1980s) that qualitative research and analysis are every bit as fraught with acts of imperfect translation and unsatisfactory instances of conceptual commensuration as the article rightly identifies in the business of counting, measuring, and generating statistics, although, of course, each approach is problematical in its own way.

A final point concerns the intriguing outcome in which the Tanzanian report to the CRC Committee barely included any mention of human rights indicators at all. Merry and Wood speculate plausibly that the country sought to highlight those achievements in social development where it has made significant progress, such as reducing child mortality. Another, compatible explanation is that perhaps the “intended users in the global South” for human rights indicators are not really the main intended users at all, and indicators are created in the global North for primary consumption in the global North, allowing intermediary international agencies to present an illusion of accountability and progress to sponsoring governments, lawmakers, taxpayers, and philanthropists. The rise of global human rights indicators may be explicable not because the numbers measure anything in any meaningful way (which, given the lack of necessary infrastructure in places like Tanzania, is unlikely), but because they track the rise of intermediary international agencies (the UN and INGOs) and authorize and legitimate this highly mediated structure of international aid and governance.

Reply

We appreciate the range of insightful comments that our article has evoked. The commentators picked up themes and ideas from the article and elaborated on them in new and interesting ways, noting areas that we need to explore further. Several of them considered the extent to which an “indicator culture” approach to understanding social life is transforming what is seen as knowable as well as reshaping governance, categories of understanding, and power relations. Mark Goodale, for example, notes that one can expose and critique the language of indicator culture but not escape it, since it constitutes the basis for bureaucratic actions. Ultimately, the commentators are grappling, as are we, with the question of whether such modes of analysis constitute a reformist, rational approach to social order or a new and more subtle mode of power, effective in part because it is unnoticed and untheorized. Quantitative knowledge is often juxtaposed to private, insider knowledge, discriminatory decision making, and random and potentially misleading narratives. While we focused on the capacity of indicators to reinforce relations of power, others have argued cogently for the opposite position. The theme that runs through our work and the comments is: What kind of knowledge do indicators produce? What is highlighted and disappeared by the process, and how does that inequality affect power relations?

Nehal Bhuta usefully turns to Callon and Latour’s work to consider how the process of indicator production can be seen as an instance of what they call translation and black-boxing: processes that reduce uncertainty. This is certainly

the process we observed: the conversion of a range of particular modes of taking care of children into a set of measures that appear solid and stable “macro-realities.” Since these processes produce homogenization and the extinction of uncertainty and ambiguity, Callon and Latour’s model provides a valuable way of thinking about how quantification works.

Moreover, focusing on such transformations of reality into new categories highlights the power dimensions of the process. Indeed, our core concern in the project was determining how the process of measuring itself reproduces power relationships. In this case, the international community proposed a system of measurements that the country did not take up, at least in the following report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, but from a larger perspective, the exercise was only one of many efforts by international organizations to foster a quantified understanding of social life in Tanzania. As Bhuta notes, other projects such as measuring state fragility take a similar approach, thus reinforcing this way of understanding governance and social life more broadly.

Dorothy Hodgson takes us to task for our lack of attention to the play of power, which she argues is inherent in the process of translation. She concludes that numbers and concepts are not being translated but forced on Tanzanians, as well as challenged by them, and suggests talking about imposition rather than translation. This is very much the vision of indicator production that we hold, but appreciate Hodgson’s far more explicit articulation of the position. Our intention was to engage quantification as a mode of power: to expose the way complex relationships within families and communities in Tanzania were converted into measurements of specific attributes stripped of any larger context. This was clearly an instance of global North assessors probing and scoring global South communities to assess performance. However, our analysis did not emphasize the link between quantification and power sufficiently, leaving it only implicit in contrast to Hodgson’s cogent critique. It is worth considering how the concept of translation itself serves to distract from the role of power even though it was central to our concerns.

Other commentators also noted the link between quantification and power. For example, Pratiksha Baxi notes that activist discourses have difficulty accessing quantitative evidence to make claims and are made more fragile but the stress on this form of knowledge as a basis for action. Kimberly Theidon points out the symbolic power of numbers that structure policy making and serve to legitimate some decisions and practices but not others. She adds the interesting point that they also provoke considerable unease. Richard Wilson notes that these indicators may not produce meaningful information but serve to mediate and legitimate relations between the burgeoning world of international agencies such as the UN and NGOs that provide aid and increasingly governance attached to aid. These comments focus, in a

variety of ways, on the power of indicators to define the world and shape governance.

Given the rise of "indicator culture," these issues merit serious consideration. The particular goal of the Tanzanian pilot study was to assess compliance with human rights norms, but the same technology has been widely used for measuring the conditions of developing states as well as their human rights behavior. It is more often economic behavior, state fragility, corruption, and problems such as poverty that are subject to global North measurement of the global South than compliance with human rights norms. With the creation of a new set of global indicators of development, the Sustainable Development Goals, which will replace the Millennium Development Goals in 2015, understanding the power dimensions of quantification is even more crucial. As Morten Jerven observes in his comment, while the Millennium Development Goals comprised 8 goals and 18 targets, the proposed Sustainable Development Goals have grown to include 17 goals and 169 targets. Rather than responding to the concerns articulated by Jerven and others about the immense costs and uncertain benefits of drastically expanding the number and scope of development indicators, the international community's desire for more data, regardless of its cost, quality, or relevance to local concerns and priorities, seems to grow unchecked. Ethnographic research will play a key role in understanding the local impacts of ever-growing demands for data, and the responses of data producers in developing countries.

An issue that warrants further attention in our analysis is the relationship between indicators and the law. Meg Satterthwaite points to the importance of translation between legal language and that of the indicators. It is noteworthy that none of those creating the indicator manual were lawyers. She comments that we pay insufficient attention to the question of how the specific terms of the human rights conventions and regional human rights courts are converted into a limited set of indicators. Similarly, Rene Urueña points to two levels of translation, first into "rights" and then into indicators. His observation that both the initial translation and the subsequent one are problematic is important. Indeed, law, like indicators, depends on constructing categories that bound social phenomena and define similarity and difference. This is clearly an important dimension of understanding the translations of human rights into indicators and the resulting slippages and absences.

A recurring response to research critiquing the way quantitative knowledge produces misleading and partial knowledge is, what is the alternative? As Mark Goodale and Richard Wilson ask, would we replace indicators with ethnographies? Or should we emphasize ways to produce better indicators? Clearly, our analysis argues that local-level indicators, designed by those who are being measured, will produce more appropriate categories for analysis and data that more accurately reflect local conditions. Such local-level indicators are frequently produced by social movement activists and NGOs,

both to justify their funding and to build a social movement. During the early years of the violence against women movement, for example, activists frequently initiated campaigns by doing a survey of the incidence of domestic violence (Merry 2006a). Yet, gathering data is expensive and time consuming. Moreover, making data commensurable across regions, countries, and classes requires the very decontextualization and focus on measurability that misses important issues or counts them in ways that are misleading.

There is no easy solution to this dilemma, but joining local experts with global ones is an important step, as is a merger of ethnographic and quantitative knowledge. Ideally, ethnographic knowledge should precede counting to determine relevant data, assess how to count, and develop useful categories. Moreover, joining ethnographic and quantitative data strengthens the ethnographic material by showing its representativeness and enhances the quantitative data by offering clues about what the numbers mean in practice. But it costs more and is not as simple for publics to consume as indicators that allow easy global comparisons and rankings.

Overall, the commentators have contributed to a significant expansion and deepening of our analysis, suggesting ways it could move. They point to translations that warrant further attention, the importance of the link between quantitative and other forms of knowledge, and the way the expansion of bureaucratic and evidence-based governance is raising the question of quantification to new levels of significance. This form of knowledge offers great promise for more open decision making and knowledge of social processes around the world but also contains risks of misleading and partial information. Given the tight link between indicators, state formation, and bureaucratic governance, this form of knowledge is not likely to disappear. We and the commentators agree that it is of critical importance to assess what this knowledge does and does not communicate effectively about the world.

—Sally Engle Merry and Summer Wood

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