

Discussion Paper on Child Participation

“... the history of child rights continues to be the history of adult actions. This will be the case as long as adults fail to take into consideration their fundamental duties... and invite children to the tables at which policies are decided and evaluated, facilitating debates in which children can take their meaningful and rightful places.” (Judith Ennew, unpublished paper)

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the efforts of Terre des Hommes- Germany to reach a common understanding on child participation and actualize the concept in its projects and programs and institutional processes.

What is child participation?

Although it is repeatedly referred to in various articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention does not explicitly give a definition of child participation. It is however best understood as a **child rights principle** and a fundamental **right** of children.

Child participation is a child rights principle. There are four guiding principles that underpin all the provisions in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and as such, guide the interpretation, implementation and realization of the articles in the Convention. The most fundamental child rights principle is the child’s right to survival and development and the other principles inter-plot in ensuring its achievement. The other guiding principles are:

- The principle of “the best interest of the child.” Children have a right to have their interests considered as a primary consideration, alongside other competing interests. It places an obligation on decision-makers to always consider whether a decision will have an impact on children’s lives, to assess what that impact will be, and to elevate children’s interests to the level of a primary consideration in the final decision¹.
- The non-discrimination principle. Children have a right to be actively protected against all forms of discrimination.
- The principle of participation. Children have a right to be heard in decision making that affects them and to decide on matters based on their evolving capacities. That rights come with responsibilities and obligations is a general human rights principle. Vital to the realization of this principle is the crucial interaction between those who hold entitlement to rights (right holder) and those with obligations to fulfilling rights (duty bearer). Participation is an important process that makes this principle real. It ensures that while rights are inherent entitlements, right holders must actively take on their responsibility of demanding these rights from those who are accountable for its fulfillment.

Child participation is a right. Aside from being a guiding principle of the UNCRC, child participation is in itself a right (civil and political) and concretely includes²:

- Right to express their opinion freely and for it to be taken account in any proceeding affecting them (expressing views effectively). (Art. 12)

¹ “Child Rights and Rights-Based Programming,” a resource document from the Child Rights Information Network.

² Clare Feinstein, Ravi Karkara and Sophie Laws. „A Workshop Report on Child Participation in the UN Study on Violence Against Children.” International Save the Children Alliance, April 2004.

- Right to freedom of expression and to receive and impart information (thinking for themselves). (Art. 13)
- Right to freedom of association and of peaceful assembly (interacting in a positive way with other people). (Art. 15)
- Right to access to information. (Art. 17)

In practical terms, participation is the involvement of girls and boys in the decisions and actions that affect their lives, the lives of their families and community and the larger society in which they live.

Since child participation is both a guiding principle and a right, this necessarily implies that it becomes not only an end in itself as a right to be fulfilled, but as a process and a means that enables the realization of the other rights of children. It means that children as holder of rights account for the obligations and demand for the fulfillment of their rights from adult duty bearers.

Why child participation?

Aside from being a fundamental right that must be fulfilled, children's involvement is necessary as it leads to:³

Child Development. Children gain competencies, abilities, confidence, independence and resilience through their active interaction with those around them and when they take part in actions and discussions to address issues that impact on their lives. Support for children's peer groups that provide a venue for peer-to-peer interaction likewise promotes solidarity among children and young people. Consequently, their experiences are spaces for learning which contribute in changing their attitudes, raise their awareness and abilities to communicate and negotiate effectively to get what they think would best respond to their concerns. Lastly, children's participation lays the foundation in the growth and development process of their becoming responsible citizens.

Protects children. Engaging in dialogue with children is an effective way of surfacing their issues, especially on how they are experiencing and are affected by abuse, violence and exploitation. It helps to assess the level of their understanding about these experiences and to identify the actions and factors that could reduce the risks for harm. Through this, children develop individual and collective ways of protecting themselves through their unity, knowledge, information and skills.

Better policies and programs for children. When children are sincerely listened to and when their views and opinions are meaningfully valued to influence adult decision-makers, this process of dialogue leads to the development of more appropriate and effective policies for children. Additionally, children's participation helps to ensure transparency and accountability for child rights and in the long-term makes children visible and audible in policies and programs.

Changed relationships between adults and children. The act of providing children with spaces to meaningfully engage with adults is by itself a recognition of their status as persons. This recognition results to a change in the balance of power between adults and children and provides an experience for adults to challenge and change their attitudes and behavior towards children and children's abilities. Through this interaction, adults are given the opportunity to understand children and their situation better, as it makes them recognize

³ Theis, Joachim. Promoting rights-based approaches (Experiences and Ideas from Asia and the Pacific), Save the Children Sweden, 2004.

that children's experiences and views are different from those of adults, thereby facilitating the process for adults to take children seriously and to respect their views.

Approaches to child participation

Various approaches and strategies have been developed by partners to concretize child participation in their work. Below are examples of such initiatives:

1. Activities directly involving children

- Peer-to-peer approach, refers to activities undertaken by projects that support and develop children in reaching out, organizing, educating and counseling other children.

- **Children in research**
For the past years, several researches have been focused on children and child rights issues. In fact, children may well be one of the most researched topics. Aside from the more traditional way of involving children as respondents to researches, several initiatives have pushed child participation in research into a higher level. Participatory action researches have involved children as active players not only as child researchers but expanded children's roles by their direct participation in conceptualizing and planning the research design, methodologies and instruments. Children were also involved in the analysis of data gathered and in popularizing research results creatively such as through visual and theater arts, video and slide show productions and in disseminating research findings through community awareness activities.

- **Children in conferences and consultations**
From the United Nations (e.g. UN Special Session on Children) and regional organizational bodies to grassroot organizations, children have been included as special representatives to conferences and consultations on defined issues and concerns. The level of how children were involved in these activities varied from simply leading invocations/national anthems and opening and closing activities, to being speakers (usually on their own experiences related to the theme) or as actual participants where they share their views and opinions on the situation being tackled and engage with adults in planning actions to address their problems.

- **Children in organizations of children and young people**
Support for organizations of children and young people is clearly recognized as an important approach to promote child participation. In the Philippines for example, the formation of Youth Councils at the village, city and national levels is institutionalized through a national legislation. This is in recognition for their "vital role in nation building."⁴ On the other hand, organizations for children are widely supported by various institutions such as the church and schools. To ensure that children who are excluded from these otherwise mainstream organizations are given opportunities to interact with their peers in groups, various initiatives to form and support children's social (or political) movements were also undertaken. These organizations, although still very much adult initiated, provide venues for children to unite in taking common self-help actions.

⁴ 1986 Philippine Constitution.

- **Children’s involvement in program management of NGOs**
Non-government organizations involve children in the various phases of their program cycle management to develop and maintain quality practice standards in their work with children. Different participatory and consultative processes that involve children are instituted throughout the planning and program development, implementation and evaluation of projects. There are also some organizations who have gone as far as including children within their management structure such as the inclusion of child representatives in the organizational policy-making body (e.g. Board of Trustees or Council).
 - **Children and the mass media**
Part of the efforts to make children's issues visible and their voices audible to the public is the support for children's engagement with the media, i.e. print, radio and television. The involvement of children in speaking out for themselves publicly about their own concerns and issues generates more public interest and lends credibility to the information being conveyed. Several NGOs who are publishing their own publications or produced videos for use as advocacy or information campaign materials have also included children in the production process either as interviewees, writers or artists.
 - **Children in legislative action and policy advocacy**
There are relatively few experiences of children's involvement in formulating proposed policies for passage or in reviewing existing policies for repeal by legislative bodies. This is due to the fact that NGOs have only started to likewise develop own competencies in undertaking legislative advocacy. Children have however participated in public hearings, both at the village and city level, as resource persons on the local policies or ordinances being discussed.
2. **Building a social environment supportive of children’s participation**
Ensuring that children are able to participate is still very much a responsibility of adults. Specifically, adults are responsible for opening up opportunities to increase children's awareness about their participation rights and to provide actual venues for children to participate. Adults must likewise ensure that children are adequately prepared by being provided with relevant information on the issues and concerns that are being tabled for decision and they must also be supported to develop their skills and competencies to communicate, negotiate and engage effectively among themselves and with adults.

To complement the work that is being done directly to support children in claiming their rights, the broadening of political spaces and participation structures (which are adult dominated) and mechanisms for children to participate is also equally given priority. This means that in wherever setting where there are children (such as within families, schools, faith-based organizations, government agencies and center and NGOs), adults are being educated and made aware of their responsibility to institutionalize the participation of children within their processes. Consequently, child participation is included as a priority advocacy agenda.

Child Participation in Programming

Evaluating child participation. There are major work areas wherein child participation could be measured. These are:⁵

- Improved access of children to information. Describes how children are supported and prepared to participate by being provided with access to information that is adequate and relevant to the issue that affects them and must be decided upon. This does not only include the information that were provided but also what information was kept or denied from the children and the reason for such.
- Changes in children's capacity to participate and influence others
 1. Refers to changes in children's abilities, self-confidence, independent decision-making, problem- solving skills and increased commitment to being involved in the work of the organization, advocating for particular issues and in helping other children as a result of their participation in the project.
 2. Changes in terms of their application of skills and abilities in how they deal with peers and adults in various settings.
 3. Changes in children's collective skills and knowledge as a group to participate in decision-making processes in the project or in their community.
 4. Changes in capability as a group to influence policies or practices that affect them.
- Improved mechanisms and opportunities for participation within the project/program and in other settings.
 1. Changes within own policies, programs and practices of the organization implementing the work with children- Refers to mechanisms on how the organization has integrated the involvement of children in providing an input and helping design, implement, monitor, evaluate and assess the impact of the project. Also includes how the children's involvement has made the project more relevant in responding to their issues and concerns, as well as how the project improved as a result of the incorporation of children's inputs and feedback.
 2. Increase in spaces and venues for children to participate, voice their opinions and influence decisions, such as in the home, schools and villages/communities.
- Collective action
 1. Changes in children's interest and commitment to work collectively with other children through peer support/self-help groups or organizations. Specifically, developments on how children organized themselves to collectively analyzed, planned and implemented activities to address a particular issue.
 2. Description of how children are initiating their own activities within the project, schools, communities and other settings to raise their concerns and recommend changes that would improve their lives. Also includes how these group actions undertaken by the children influenced a policy, program or practice that affected their lives.

Problems and Emerging Issues and Dilemmas in Child Participation

Why is it not happening?

Traditional and cultural values that perpetuate the power of adults over children, of men over women (in this case of boys over girls) is a major block to the realization of children's participation. Prevailing traditions and culture prescribe that children are better left unseen and unheard, as conveyed in usual reactions towards situations when children are

⁵ Global Impact Monitoring Reporting Guidelines, Save the Children (UK)- Philippine Program, March 2005.

expressing views is seen as a sign of disrespect and an open challenge to the authority of adults and of the dominant gender.

Deeply ingrained attitudes and perceptions that children are helpless individuals who must be protected from sensitive information and difficult issues and concerns, and which are socially ascribed as within the realm of the adults is another reason why children are not allowed to participate.

Admittedly, consultative, inclusive and participatory processes often lengthen the time involved for planning and implementation of activities, are tedious and require high investments in time, people and resources, as well as organizational and individual commitment. Oftentimes, adults do away with involving children to cut short the process by doing things by themselves.

Disenfranchisement as citizens. Participation of children is closely associated with the legal personality and recognition that the State accords to children as citizens. In most countries, legal citizenship is arrived at upon the age of 18 years old, when the right to vote is acquired. The lack of legal status of persons 17 years old and below therefore reinforces adult's lack of efforts to engage children and children's own attitudes and perceptions towards their own interest to participate.

Unintended Outcomes

As organizations explore and evolve approaches that promote child participation, unintended outcomes have been observed to result from such well-intentioned attempts. This is a result of the fact that promoting child participation challenges many long-held beliefs about children and of adults' own inadequate experiences about their own participation and involvement as citizens. Additionally, different approaches could work effectively depending on the context of the work. Above all these, evolving programs that truly promote ethical and meaningful participation remains a continuing challenge for child rights organizations. Outlined below are example of the issues that have been observed among projects that promote child participation:

- Issues on equity and inclusion in child participation
Equity by age. It is common to find young adults⁶ among projects working with older children and adolescents. These young adults were usually the children who have actively participated in the project and having found an affirming and accepting community within the project and having developed a commitment to be involved in child rights work, have continued to be part of the project beyond their childhood. Since they have been through most of the capacity building activities which the organization could offer and have been through various guided experiences, they are usually more articulate and confident in comparison to the children in the project.

Unfortunately, most often, organizations do not have a separate program and plan of action to support and define the involvement of young adults within their projects and continue to involve them in the same activities designed for children. Usually organizational staff continue to see and refer to them as 'children,' while at the same time giving these young adults leadership roles and more responsibilities than older children in the project, e.g. young adults speaking out on child rights issues in press conferences and consultations, Council leaders/members of children and youth organizations are composed mostly of young adults. This unintentionally deprives children of the opportunity to take on these roles by themselves. Additionally, among children, leadership roles and being delegated with responsibilities is viewed as a source of power. This

⁶ 18 years old and above, more commonly referred to in development projects as young people

practice then unintentionally reflects the prevailing culture of adults domination over children.

This unintended outcome could be addressed by continuing the participation of young adults, but organizations must clearly recognize them for what they are- that they have now entered adulthood. Organizations must have clear policies that ensure that children remain as the key actors in responding to their issues and concerns and also define follow through programs that support the changing needs and concerns of young adults. This could be done by continuing efforts at working with young adults as a child rights support group and finding opportunities for them to increase involvement outside, i.e. communities, rather than within the project.

Equity according to skills and competencies of children. Children within projects develop different competencies at different paces. Adults within the project on one hand, define their own standards of competencies (based on their own ideas and perceptions) that must be developed by children as indicators upon which the project will be measured. This leads to a tendency to "showcase" and form "core group" of leaders composed of children who have become more competent in articulating issues and in taking on leadership roles. These children then become the focus of "specialized trainings" and are given more responsibilities towards their peers and in the project. This unfortunately unintentionally leads to the formation of an "elite" group of children. While this certainly affirms and strengthens self-esteem of this group of "advanced" children, it results to the exclusion of less articulate children and those with capacities that do not meet adult prescribed standards. At the same time, it raises the level of the barrier for other children to gain access to the program as they have to meet the criteria which is embodied in the characteristics of the children in the "elite" group.

- How much information and which decisions. It is usually difficult for organizations to decide at which levels they would want children to be involved in decision-making. Some organizations interpret child participation to mean that children must have access to all information and to be included in making all decisions about the project. This is the case when adults fail to consider the fact that these projects were conceived by adults in the first place, and that fulfillment of the objectives of the project is still very much an adult responsibility. This unintentionally leads to children having access to information that does not concern them and being burdened with the responsibility of making decisions that they should not be responsible for. This could be seen in projects wherein children ended up being embroiled in organizational conflicts and becoming the "prize" for conflicting adults. The inclusion of children as members of the Board of Trustees of NGOs also raises some ethical questions on what levels must children be made responsible for in terms of decision-making. It could be argued that children can provide an input on the organizations programs, policies and practices without sitting in the Board of Trustees. It is also not an assurance that children could truly have a voice in an adult dominated body such as the Board of Trustees.
- Child participation as tool to legitimize adult positions, as in the case when conferences and consultations are conducted to hear children's opinions about certain issues for the purpose of coming up with positions and recommendations on the issue at hand. Reports that come out after such consultations and conferences would highlight the fact that children were involved as participants, when in reality these were one-shot activities and children were no longer involved in ensuring that their opinions were really taken on and implemented.

- Child participation and monetary compensation for involvement. There are some projects who practice the provision of monetary compensation for children's involvement, such as through “bother fees” or honorarium and the development of children and young people as “Junior Staff.” While these practices may sustain the children’s motivation to participate in the project, in the long run it clouds the children’s orientation and perceptions about the concept of participation as their motivation may understandably be propelled by getting financial compensation or view it as a future opportunity for work.
- Children as extension of the organization’s staff. Most often, children who have developed competencies and awareness on their rights also develop an increased commitment to be involved in child rights work. They start to help out in reaching out to other children and take on more responsibilities in educating, organizing and to some extent providing peer counseling to other children. However, when organizational policies are not clear, these children may end up taking on and being burdened with responsibilities that are the accountability of project staff. Children may find themselves implementing group activities that were not designed by themselves or relevant to their context but rather were expected outputs of a specific project of an NGO.
- Adult defined “organizations” of children and young people. As adults explore new ways of working with children by supporting children’s rights to form associations, they may impose processes, structures and mechanisms that are adult conceived (i.e. usually found in adult initiated organizations). Impositions that could be made by adults on children’s organizations may be for example through the setting up of a formal structure of leadership, articulation of basis through constitution and by-laws or processes in decision-making. While these structures and processes may have its value in strengthening children’s organizations, they may not be relevant to the rather transient nature of children’s groups and organizations. These may even block the natural and creative processes that children are initiating on their own as they form their own peer support groups.
- Protecting children in their participation. An important concern that is usually not factored in in promoting children’s right to participation is the need to ensure their protection rights in the whole process of their participation. As children participate, the risks for harm through abuse or exploitation may actually increase as children get more involved in more activities in various venues and as they are exposed to a larger number of people. Child protection issues may include any of the following:
 1. Security risks and infringement on confidentiality and privacy arising from participation, either by exposure to media or through public awareness activities or campaigns.
 2. Portrayal of children as pitiful subjects through the media.
 3. Abuse (i.e. verbal, physical, sexual and psychological) by and among children and young people and from adults (including project staff of NGOs) within and outside the project.
 4. Children may also experience discrimination from other children and adults who do not fully understand the context of their situation, such as during conferences and joint activities.

Implications to our Work: Building on what we have learned

Child participation must essentially go beyond the project, preparing children for citizenship. While children should be provided with experiences within the project that develop their awareness and competencies to participate, the long-term goal must be that they are adequately prepared for broader participation in the home, their community and in the larger society.

Projects must equally strengthen the capacities of adults in the children's social environment to open up opportunities and spaces for children's meaningful participation. Promotion of child participation should not only involve direct work with the children, but must likewise include increasing adults' awareness on child participation and developing structures and mechanisms that support children's participation in the home, schools, and community organizations.

Capacity-building within Terre des Hommes Germany and among project partners.

The awareness and competencies of the staff of TDH and the project partners must be developed to ensure that child participation is institutionalized within the organization's policies, programs and practices.

Terre des Hommes must develop/strengthen organizational policies that promote and include children's participation and protect children as they participate. The promotion of child participation must be included in the articulated policies of the organization and mechanisms to reduce risks for harm and address child protection issues arising from children's participation must be clearly established in the Child Protection Policy.

Budget allocation for child participation. To reflect the organizations' sincere commitment to making child participation happen, corresponding budget allocation for activities that promote child participation should be reflected in the organization's annual project budgets.

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