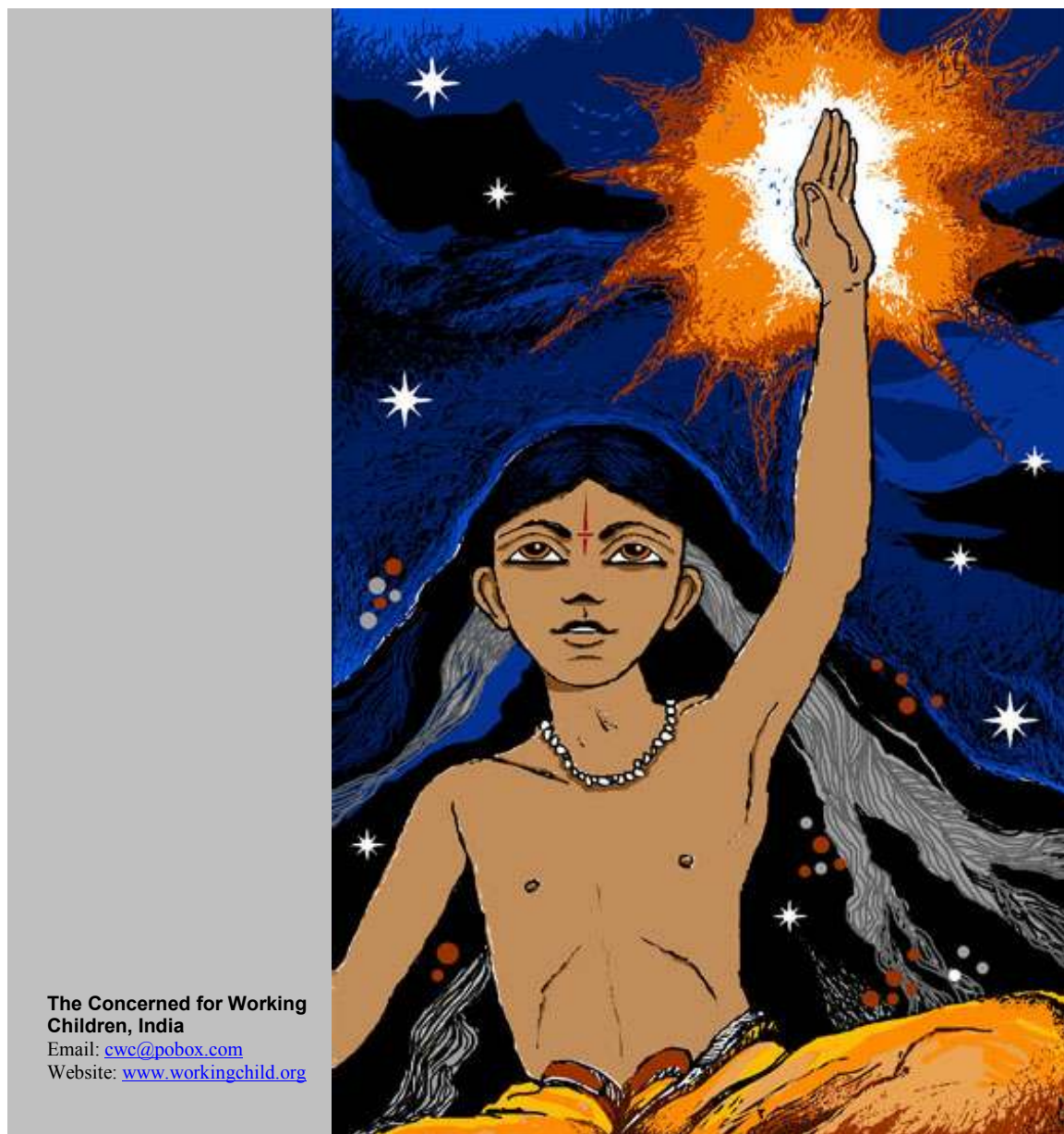


## **A JOURNEY IN CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION**

**By the Concerned for Working Children**

Compiled and Edited by:

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## **FOREWORD**

We, the Concerned for Working Children have been working in partnership with children for the past 25 years, to enhance their protagonism and participation and realise their rights. In this document we have put together some of the experiences and perceptions related to children's participation that we have gathered over the years and tried to convert these into principles and tools that would further the pedagogy and praxis of children's participation.

For us, it has been an exciting journey and the learning curve has been steep. It has humbled us and shown us how to re establish a relationship with the child within each one of us.

For the children themselves their right to participation is the opening up of a new and exciting experience. For the first time they see the world of adults, they begin to understand how this world works and what they need to do to intervene in it. This experience is often tinged with disappointment, as at times they find that we, adults, haven't made such a good job of it, but there is also joy in the realisation that we do care and that we have learnt to respect them. What the children need from us is an honest, unbiased and in-depth presentation of the way things are and the tools and skills to enable them to build a better world.

This document is an attempt to share the body of knowledge that we have acquired and also to raise several questions those still require answers.

This is by no means a definitive position as the arena of children's participation is only marginally explored. In the course of our work, children constantly reveal new dimensions of themselves and these insights constitute a continual learning process for us adults.

This document, however, does not document processes or methodology and only tries to share some conceptual insights.

It is a document to which we will continue to add and modify as our insights widen and as children continue to teach us more about themselves.

## Introduction

Children's Participation is not a project, it is not event based; it is a running theme through every action or intervention and it requires a major paradigm shift. The understanding of participation and the way it is translated into action varies and seems to be defined by the socio-cultural context of the child and the ideological frame surrounding this understanding. However it is important to arrive at a culturally neutral definition of children's participation, where the principles are common, though the manifestations may vary according to the situation of children.

When Children's Participation is seen within the frame of protagonism it takes on another dimension. The right and the ability to advocate on one's own behalf, to be in control and to be a part of decision making processes and interventions. This form of participation of children and youth enhances the concept of civil society participation and strengthens democratic processes.

Children's participation should enhance children's personhood. Often their individual growth is side lined, especially when they are a part of an organisation. Children's participation should also be in keeping with their capacity and ability (milestones of development) and contribute positively to the process of children's growth and development. However, all this operates within the context of children's rights and their participation is the means by which children realise their rights.

The 'levels' of children's participation are a combination of the nature of children's participation (individual or collective) and the structures in which they participate. Children may participate as individuals or through their organisations or as representatives of their organisations. Children's participation may take place formally or informally and with or without structures. Their participation may be initiated by the children themselves or by adults or as a result of a partnership between children and adults. Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation has actually been rather misleading as it more aptly describes the role of adults viz a viz children's participation, rather than the levels of participation of children<sup>1</sup>.

The role that adults play in the arena of children's participation is a wide spectrum. On the one hand it ranges from resisting children's participation to being facilitators of children's participation and ultimately, partners. Adults play these roles consciously and unconsciously and their roles could vary depending on the situation and the children they are with.

Children are political, economic, ecological, socio-cultural and spiritual (religious) beings. There are several arenas where children do and can participate that satisfy one or several aspects of their personhood. The arenas of participation are several and varied, the home, school, work, and community, going further to state and international levels.

All the above constitute the ecology of children's participation. To enable children's participation to happen constructively and effectively and in a way that is positive for children, they need to be empowered. The three essential elements of empowerment are: an organisation or forum, access to and use of relevant information and access to resources (structural, material, human and financial).

We the adults can play a proactive role if we wish to enable children's participation. However in order to perform this part adequately, we need to prepare ourselves. This has to be done with utmost seriousness and honesty. And perhaps the first lesson is that we will have to unlearn many things before we can 'learn'.

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<sup>1</sup> For levels of children's participation please refer to page 17,18 & 19 of this document.

### **The context:**

The concept of 'the best interest of the child', an underlying framework for the realisation of the CRC implicitly guarantees the participation of children in all decisions concerning them and the CRC is the first international instrument that very strongly advocates for the participation of children and their right to form associations.

The CRC may be divided into three areas of focus. They are the three P's. The articles concerning the **protection** of children, those related to the **provision** of services to children and those concerning **participation** or the recognition of children as political beings with both civil and political rights.

Most of us find it easy to translate into programming the articles of the Convention related to protection and provision. When these are read separately they are easier to translate into action, as it is our (adults) perception of the nature and quality of these articles that we convert into interventions and not those of the children themselves.

Many of us seem to miss the vital link between provision and protection with the right to participation. When read together, this third element gives a whole new dimension to the first two, that children have a right to determine the nature and quality of all protection and provision that they have a right to. In fact this would make it mandatory that all interventions must be designed with the active and informed participation of the children concerned and not by adults alone.

Children have asserted their right to intervene in their environment and change it for the better. As a result many of us have realised that the active and equal participation of children in all matters concerning them is both realistic and beneficial. However in order to enable this we adults and adult led organisations have to examine ourselves critically and redefine our roles, sometimes to the extent of unlearning what we thought to be 'right' and reconstructing ourselves closer to the children's paradigm.

Unfortunately, though children's right to participation is a much discussed and heavily debated issue, very few have actually been able to translate this into action and make it a ground reality.

Are the principles of Children's Rights universal and is their definitional context neutral? There are perhaps some elements related to children's rights such as those related to the physical well-being of a child that could be universal and context neutral for example, children inhaling toxic substances, carrying heavy weights etc.

However, how do we agree on other aspects that relate to the psychosocial issues related to children? If child marriage is considered harmful in Asia below the age of 18 why is sexual activity permissible for children below this age in the West? Is this related to the development of the individual child or is it a social context that determines what is acceptable and what is not? Or are children living within a 'larger' context subject to different socio-cultural paradigms? Is it therefore possible to arrive at a common/universal set of principles in this regard keeping in mind that each child is unique and develops at a unique pace?

On the other hand we also claim that the socio-cultural, environmental, political and economic variations in children's situations should not be an excuse for diluting the principles of Children's Rights. How do we reconcile these two?

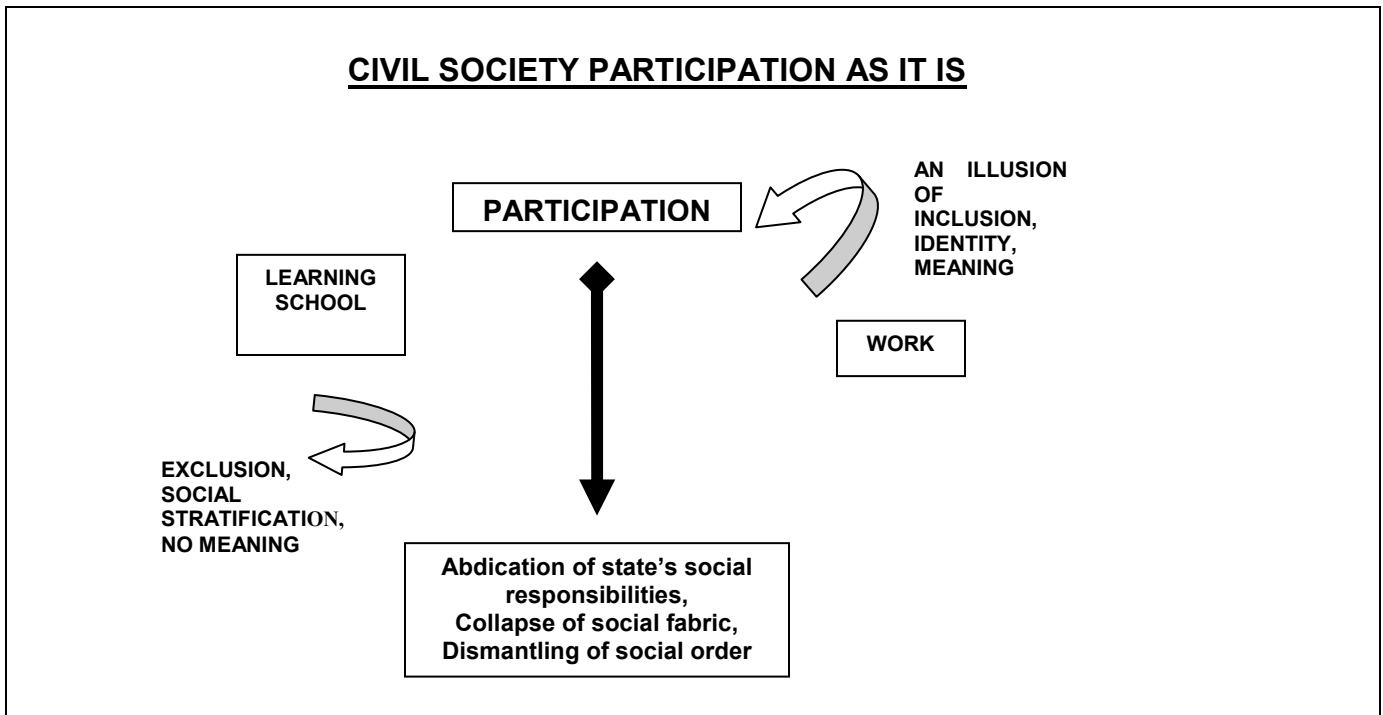
### **Civil society participation:**

In several countries of the world, various factors, including the system of education has resulted in social stratification, the increased marginalisation of thousands of people and their political exclusion. This has drastically reduced the participation of civil society. The entire situation is aggravated by the fact that the state is no more accountable and has abdicated its duty and in some cases become the violator of people's rights. There are no safety nets, no protection for the weak and the entire social fabric is unravelling.

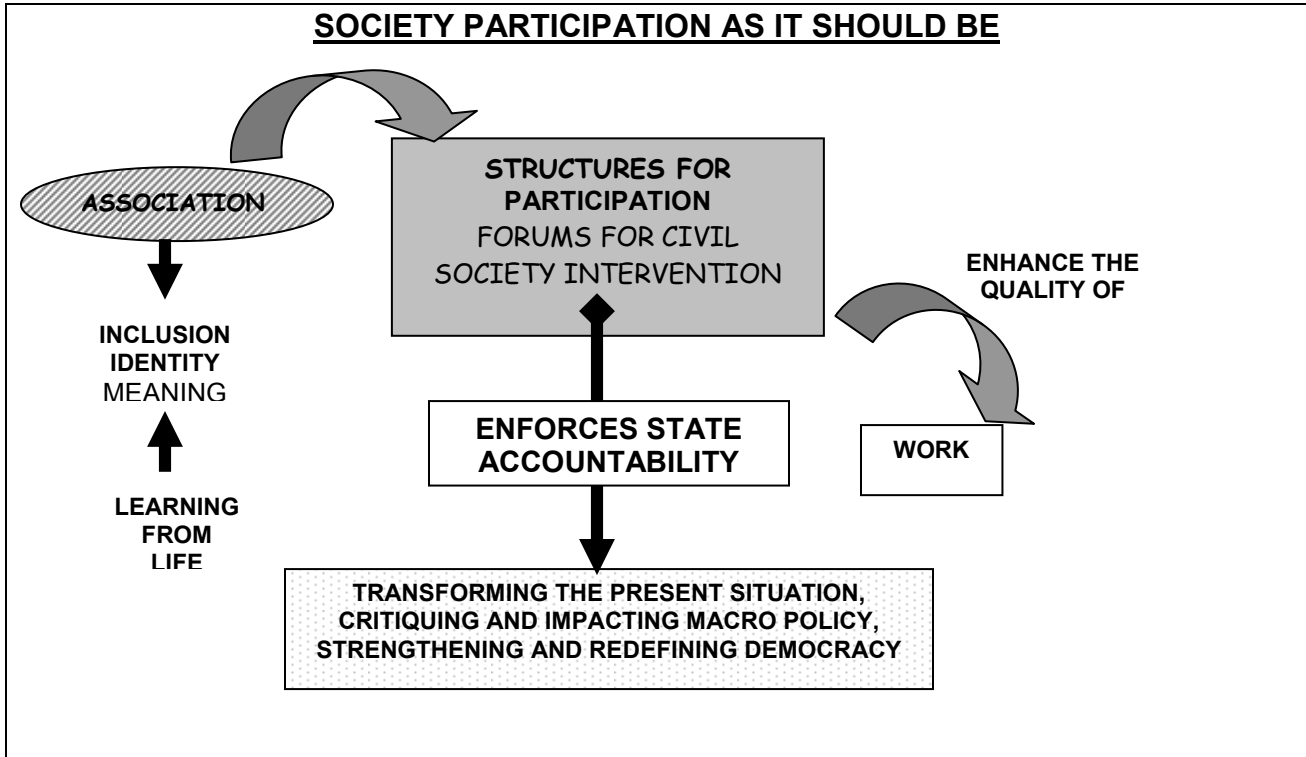
In such situations children find work a preferred option to schooling, as it gives them an illusion of participation, an identity – the feeling of belonging and meaning to life. However this does not encourage the individual's participation in democratic processes.

***Participation appeared in the development context, as an approach (philosophy) to address power relations in society. Participation is seen as part and parcel of the process of empowerment of the disadvantaged. It has firm roots in liberal democratic values and gender justice. It is not seen as a means to achieve development goals, but as an end in itself.***

C. Upendranath. The Theory, Potential and Challenges of Participation, Exchanges – 1997



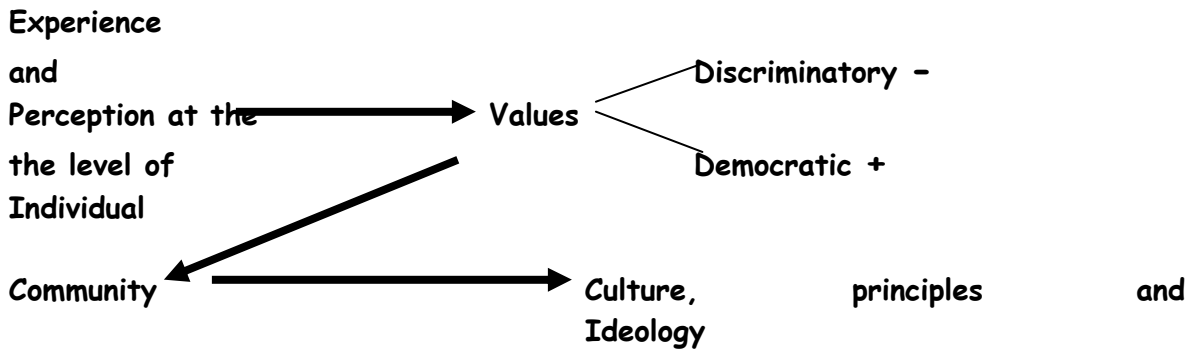
The key to rectify this situation is to enable meaningful, informed and active participation. This also means enabling participation of children and fulfilling article 12 of the CRC. However for children to participate meaningfully they require an organisation or platform where they can come together and share experiences and evolve an identity.



**Socialisation and empowerment:**

Children are often socialised in discriminatory societies and we need to recognise that children are not always naturally inclusive. It is therefore important to engage with children and young people in order to encourage values of inclusion and recognition and work towards a vision of a participatory democracy.

First of all it is important to recognise that both adults and children are socialised in the same way and that adults socialise children within the dominant socio-cultural paradigm.



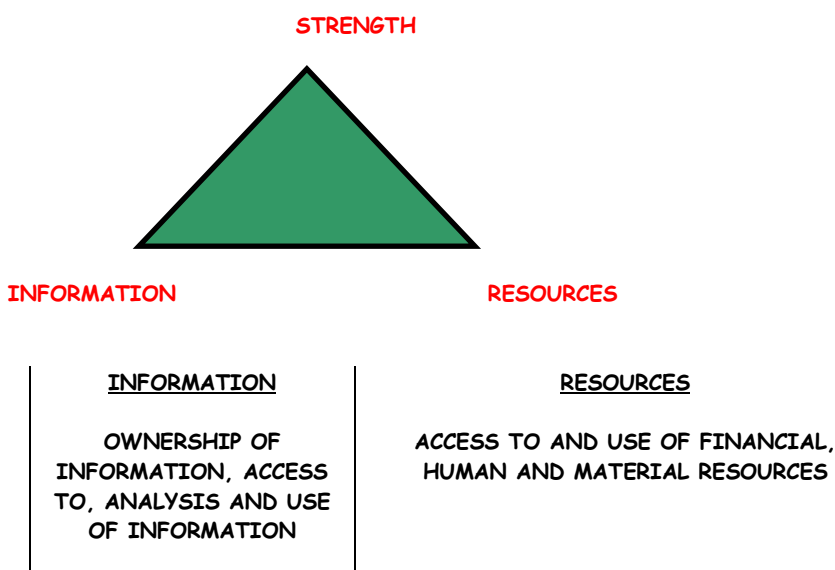
Children and adults learn from what they experience at home, community and the world around them. This would include the role models they see, media and television. This experience conditions their perceptions

of caste and class, gender, democracy and justice. These perception when and if reinforced by repeated experiences of the same kind, convert into values. These values could be discriminatory and/or democratic depending on the individuals experience and therefore perceptions.

At a community level when a group of people have the same experience and therefore share the same values, these values get converted into culture and sometimes even ideology. This is a spiral and each time the cycle is repeated the values and culture get reinforced unless there is a variation in the experience. However the alternate experience needs to be strong and real enough to counter and transform the earlier experience.

What is therefore required is a 're-socialisation' of both adults and children, including us (the ones who design the intervention). This 're-socialisation' should not be one of 'brain washing' but of empowerment. In CWC we refer to it as the triangle of empowerment. (Also see page 29).

#### THE EMPOWERMENT TRIANGLE



This empowerment has to address three main areas; the obtaining of strength or power through democratic organisation and leadership; the ownership of information, the access to and analysis and use of information; and thirdly, the access to and use of financial, human and material resources.

*When Nagaraj first came in contact with CWC in 1989, he was a very bright 10 year old from Kolkeri, a little village in South Kanara in the south of India. He had to leave school to take care of his younger brother and was working at home to support the family. Today he is a bright, articulate young man who was the founder President of Bhima Sangha' and the founder president of Namma Sabha'. He is also a graduate in Appropriate Construction Technology.*

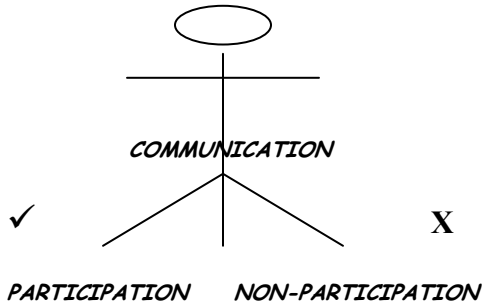
*Nagaraj heads a team of graduates of ACT with the same ease and maturity with which he holds discussions with international academicians. He travels between villages and small towns of Karnataka, building low cost, environmentally friendly aesthetic homes – and also sits in on the Executive Council Meetings of the CWC as a board member. He takes off time to celebrate the Basarur Habba, the village festival and with the same enthusiasm learns the samba from his Brazilian friends.*

*His links with his culture are very strong and he has been able to bring in a strong sense of equity and justice in all his dealings with adults and children. He is very involved with the development of his village. Never dogmatic, people and children find him very approachable and the young members of Bhima Sangha see him as a friend, their Anna (elder brother).*



However, this process of empowerment has to be grounded in experience that can happen only through the active participation of the individual.

An act of participation is an act with the body, mind or heart, or all three. This act has to be communicated and therefore communication is a key to participation.



**A Definition of Positive Participation:**

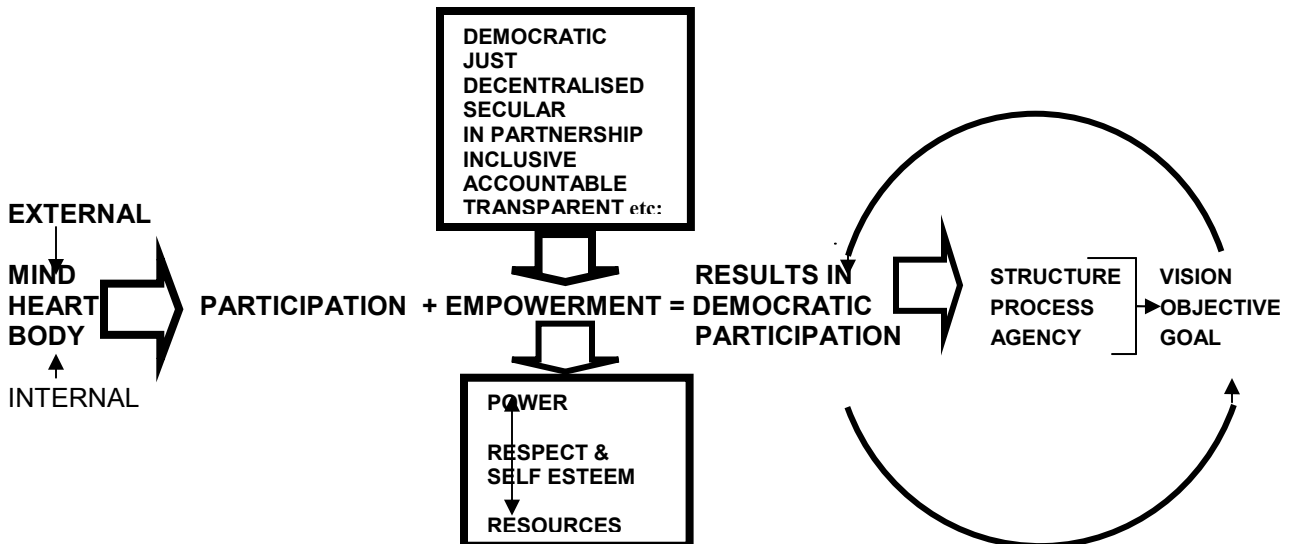
The mere act of participation does not qualify the nature or quality of the participation. It could be an example of positive or negative participation. It is therefore necessary to define what we mean by 'Good Participation'.

The ideological frame surrounding participation determines the quality and nature of participation.

Democratic participation or participatory democracy would include the following elements:

- Democratic
- Just
- Accountable
- Transparent
- Inclusive
- Decentralized
- Mutual respect
- Secular
- In partnership
- Positive discrimination etc.

The resocialisation or empowerment we engage in should address the above points among others.



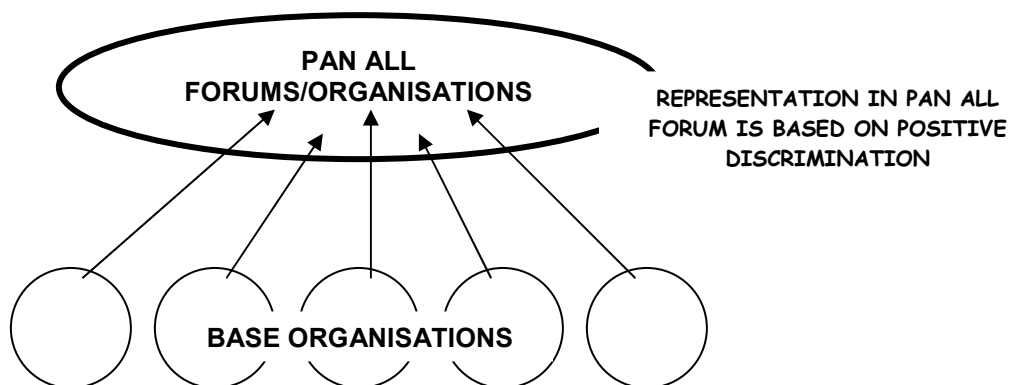
### **Issues of inclusion and non-discrimination:**

Many of us are grappling with issues of inclusion and non-discrimination. How does one ensure that an organisation of children includes or enables all children to gain membership and participate equally? Some children's organisations have grouped all children together and in some cases adults seem to have determined the composition of the children's organisation based on their perception and interpretation of non-discrimination and inclusion. In CWC we have not followed this approach. We allowed children to form organisations based on their need, commonality of issues and concerns and comfort. They fell into natural groupings and we did not impose our thinking on them. Working children wanted to come together to address their problems and they formed Bhima Sangha. Working youth wanted to come together not only to address their problems but also to directly intervene in political structures and they formed Namma Sabha. Kids who were differently-abled wanted their own forum, just as school children. Now the kids want a pan all organisation for all children and are trying to work out the structure and functioning of this pan all organisation/child rights organisation/ federation. This is taking time because the kids are thinking things through and this process is vital if the structure is to be appropriate, viable and sustainable. Our policy is not to rush these processes but to allow children to arrive at solution they are most comfortable with. Our role is to provide appropriate inputs as and when required. We also believe in the need for providing for the positive discrimination of the marginalised as these children are disadvantaged, require a head start and some very special opportunities in order to 'compete' or participate with their privileged counterparts.

### **Equal participation of children from varied backgrounds:**

To enable an environment where children from different background can participate equally it is important that first of all they have a base group and whose constituency they represent. The base group formed by those who have similar issues, concerns and aspirations gives each individual within the base group strength and the feeling of power. These base groups enable children or adults from unequal backgrounds to feel equal in a pan all organisation as they experience the strength of their constituency behind them.

Individuals sans the base groups participating in pan all forums will continue to feel unequal and their sense of belonging and level of participation will largely depend on the largess of the stronger participants.



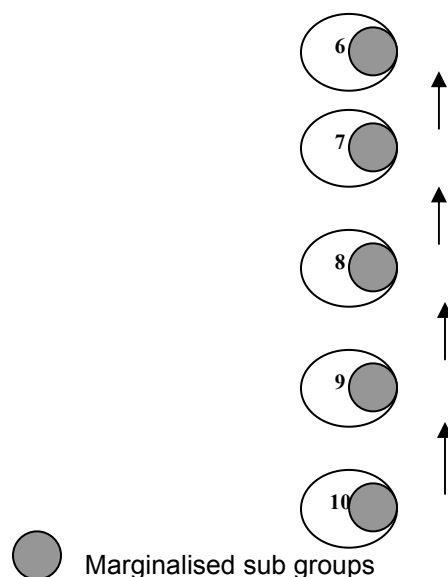
The representation of the base groups in the pan all forums should be based on positive discrimination. That is, the weaker constituency gets more representation than the stronger ones. For example, the Makkala Panchayats have more seats reserved for girls than boys.

### **Strategy for Upward Mobility of Marginalised Children:**

While working with children, one of the dilemmas is to decide which group of children need to be facilitated to participate on a priority basis. This decision will determine where our energies and resources as facilitators of children's participation get focused first. Our experience shows that those children who are the most marginalised, and those who have the severest constraints to participate actually need it the most.

The first question therefore is how do we identify the most marginalised group of children? Should it be on the basis of their economic, social, cultural, geographical or their political situation? Very often the choice is made based on any one of the above. But that may be misleading. For instance, in some situations, those who are politically marginalised may be economically stronger than several other groups in the community. Hence it may be more productive to see how the various aspects related to marginalisation overlap and based on that, identify the most marginalised, less marginalised and so forth. It is also crucial that we look at issues related to gender, age and ability of children while determining the focus group because even within a marginalised group, there could be individual children who are further marginalised.

The result may appear like diagram below, where group 1 is the least marginalised and the levels of marginalisation increases with the numbers. So group 10 is the most marginalised.



We would therefore begin work with group 10. A time will come when these children, through their participation and agency, become upwardly mobile and acquire a status similar to that of children of group 9. At that point, if the children of group 9 are not equipped to participate effectively and use the opportunities that have been opened up for the participation of children, these spaces may close. So it is necessary that as our work progresses with group 10, we need to begin facilitating the participation of children in-group 9.

### **Nature and intensity of children's participation:**

The nature, intensity and quality of children's participation vary quite considerably between groups. The context or situation determines the nature and intensity of participation. Participation can manifest in diverse ways, from militancy and activism to negotiation and collective bargaining and even demonstrating through example. The situation determines what children select as their approach for the occasion. In fact an area worth studying is the 'strategies children use to exhibit their agency' and how children make these choices based on the context, issue, actors, players, stakeholders and the result they want. In Kundapura where the Gram Panchayats have been 'listening to children' for sometime and the Task Force meetings are held regularly, children do not need to demonstrate as much militancy as they used to. Where as in Bellary District, (a highly paternalistic and patriarchal society) where the Toofan Programme is relatively new children still need to adopt the direct activist approach. This does not mean that their achievements are any more or less or that their level of participation is higher or lower. It is just based on the specific context.

For example children seem to tailor make their strategies to 'use' the available structures. In Bangalore where there is no Makkala Panchayat and Task Force, children have devised innovative ways of getting the Municipal Corporation to accede to their demands, including mass rallies, demonstrations, using mainstream media and publishing enquiry committee reports exposing the exploitation of children working in urban occupations. Also the reservation for different groups of children (girls and boys) in the Makkala Panchayats varies according to their degree of marginalisation and population distribution.

Another determinant of children's strategies seems to be the nature of the issue itself. When Uchengamma, the president of Bhima Sangha took up the issue of child marriage, she first went to the police, but not the local police, the district police and the District Commissioner. She did not go to the Makkala Mitra (Children's Friend) or the Gram Panchayat, though they were brought in later. This was a very sound strategy as she established the violation of law before enlisting local support against a deeply entrenched traditional practice. However, when the issue of banning alcohol was raised, the Makkala Panchayat took this up directly at a meeting of the Task Force. This was in order to ensure that the adults do not completely 'lose face' and have the possibility to become 'good guys'. (For additional information on Uchengamma please see our website: [www.workingchild.com](http://www.workingchild.com))

There are several examples of how children have devised strategies based on the context and the stake holders/players or the persons/institutions they have to negotiate with. We have also found that they seem to most often adopt 'win-win' strategies.

### **Children adopt 'win-win' strategies:**

The strategies that children most often adopt and/or design are 'win-win'. They seem to instinctively know that these are more effective and sustainable. They know that they have to continue to live with adults, be it their parents, care givers, teachers, members of the community; and they know that direct confrontation, especially those that result in the adults 'losing face' would be detrimental to the relationship. They also care for these people and do not want to hurt them.

*A person who was travelling by bus from Kundapura town to his village in Keradi was highly inebriated. When the conductor came to him to collect the fares, he picked up an argument with the conductor, saying he had already paid him Rs.100.00 and that he had to return the balance after deducting the fare. The conductor tried to convince the alcoholic saying he had not collected any money from him. The argument got heated and the co-passengers too began to get annoyed with the drunkard and supported the conductor. Finally the conductor lost his cool and pushed the man out of the bus. He had to walk all the way (8 kilometres) home.*

*Children's case study, Jan 2002.*

Their skills of conflict resolution are also amazing and it would be very useful to do an in-depth study of the strategies that children use. The two case studies of how children have dealt with alcohol in Keradi and Mathihalli are good illustrations of this. (For additional information please see our website: [www.workingchild.com](http://www.workingchild.com) )

## **The Makkala Panchayat closes liquor shops in Keradi Panchayat**

Nandrolli is a small hamlet in Keradi Panchayat<sup>2</sup> of Udupi Taluk, a remote village located on the Western Ghats in Karnataka, India. It has 75-80 families and a population of 400 to 450. The village is typically agrarian, cut off from the advancement of modern technology. It lacks proper roads and transport, communication systems and other infrastructure.

*Ganesh is 10 years old. He is a student of class 4. One morning while at school his headmaster, Mr. Sudhakar Shetty, observed something abnormal about Ganesh. He went close to Ganesh and as he started talking the headmaster realized that the boy was drunk. It took a long time for him to find out why the boy was drunk.*

*Ganesh's father had been forcing the boy to drink alcohol every day, as somebody in the village told him that alcohol was a good medicine for asthma.*

*The Headmaster spoke to the child's father and convinced him of the ill effects of alcohol especially on children. The father has stopped giving alcohol to the boy.*

*Children's case study, Jan 2002.*

Alcoholism was a way of life and a major issue in this Panchayat. Besides licensed vendors, liquor was sold in vegetable and grocery shops, by cycle and under the trees and other innovative ways. Though this had come up in various meetings at the Panchayat and Taluk level, nobody gave it any attention. The Makkala Panchayat<sup>3</sup>, in the monthly Task Force<sup>4</sup> meetings, pointed out several times that there were too many arrack (local liquor) shops in the village. The Panchayat ignored it as some of the shops selling liquor belonged to the Gram Panchayat who were receiving rental from them. During the Makkala Gram Sabha in the January 2002, the Makkala Panchayat raised it again. They identified it not only as an individual or family problem, but also as a community problem, affecting the entire village. Prior to coming together for the Gram Sabha meeting the children had collected several case studies of drunkenness and the problems caused as a result in

the village.

Based on their findings they analysed why alcoholism was a major issue of concern both for them, the children and their communities. They said that alcoholism was the cause of a lot of disharmony and violence at home, loss of income. 'We are not able to study at home'; 'we do not get money for tuition fees, books and stationery'. In some houses, the children said they do not even get sufficient food, "we are teased by other children and teachers say your father is an alcoholic". The children analysing the adverse impact of alcohol, said besides the above, it causes many health problems, injuries and death, "there is unnecessary expenditure on medicines and doctors on account of family members, etc".

*In a little hamlet called Mort, in the Keradi Panchayat, a man aged about 40, was very drunk. His gait was very unbalanced. At night he was walking back home and had to cross a river. As he crossed the river on the narrow footbridge, he lost his balance and fell into the river. He began shouting and luckily some people from the area came running and rescued him.*

*Children's case study, Jan 2002.*

Though the children presented their findings at the Gram Sabha<sup>5</sup>, it did not move the adult Panchayat members, nor could they push it strongly as an agenda for action.

The members of the Makkala Panchayat raised the issue again in the following Task Force meeting. But it was brushed aside saying, "What is your problems? Some people drink; we cannot stop it; we cannot close down the shops because they have licence from the government; moreover, law does not prohibit anybody from stocking up to 10 packets of liquor." When the children were told to produce information about how many people drink and how much money is spent on it, they could not provide any realistic information. The adults closed the issue with an advise to children 'but you should not drink'.

<sup>2</sup> A Panchayat is a cluster of villages with a population of approximately 3,500 to 10,000.

<sup>3</sup> The Makkala Panchayat is Children's Village Councils set up in Karnataka jointly by Bhima Sangha and the Concerned for Working Children. It is forum for all children to participate in the process of decision making and governance in the village.

<sup>4</sup> The Task Force is a structure created by the facilitation of CWC. It is a tripartite body composed of government officials, representatives from the community and businessmen/employers, and is the decision making body in the Panchayat. Elected representatives of the Makkala Panchayat and Bhima Sangha are members of this body.

<sup>5</sup> Children's Village Council meeting with the concerned officials where in they discuss and raise issues that matters them and their community, in order to arrive at speedy solutions.

This was a blow to the children.

In the following Makkala Panchayat meeting the children decided that they required a better plan of action. They discussed the adults' apathy and the reasons why they were ignoring this issue and decided that the only way to 'open their eyes' was to prove it in monetary terms.

The first step was to collect actual quantitative information. The children decided that as a part of their 'clean the village' campaign they would get the required information. They first cleaned up the entire area surrounding the arrack shops in Nandrolli. Once all the sachets were cleared, they continued their cleaning activity on a daily basis for the entire week. Each day they gathered all the empty sachets of arrack near the shops and counted them. They found that an average of 300 packets of arrack are consumed per day. Then they made their calculations. A packet of arrack costs Rs. 11.00. Three hundred packets cost Rs. 3300.00. This worked out to Rs.99, 000.00 per month and Rs.11, 88,000.00 per year. This was a huge amount for only a small hamlet with a total population of about 400 to 450 people.

From their previous experience the children knew that most members of the Gram Panchayat were not supportive and so decided to keep this information secret until the right moment

They knew that the Taluk Panchayat member, Mr. Nagappa Kotari, was very sympathetic to their cause and so the children shared their information with Mr. Nagappa and one of the Co-ordinators of CWC. At this time the Irrigation Department invited Bhima Sangha<sup>6</sup> for a tree-planting programme. During this programme, when the children were invited to speak they spoke about alcoholism and presented the information they had gathered to all those present.

*A person came down from his village Bellala in the Keradi Panchayat, to Kundapura town. In the town, he had several drinks of 'arrack'<sup>7</sup>, a country-made liquor. Towards evening he was very drunk as he got into the bus to go back to his village fully. In the bus he fell asleep. The co-passengers did not disturb him. The bus reached its destination. The man was still fast asleep and did not get off at his stop. The bus returned to Kundapura town. The man was still asleep. While the bus was parked at the depot, some people in the town pushed him out of the bus. He had to sleep the whole night in the bus depot, for there was no other bus leaving for his village that evening. The next day morning he travelled home by the same bus, people began talking about his escapade and soon this news spread to the entire village. It was a big shame for him and an eye-opener for the entire village.*

*Children's case study, Jan 2002.*

Again at the Independence Day celebrations conducted at the main school in the Panchayat on 15<sup>th</sup> August the Children invited the Executive Director of CWC to the celebrations. During this programme the children again presented all the information they collected and explained the process of information collection. The Taluk Panchayat members, the headmaster, teachers, other invitees and the entire village were shocked by the information shared by children. They could not imagine the huge revenue loss for the

village. It was inconceivable. The entire gathering also felt ashamed; that they had been informed by children; they, the adults had not recognised this as an issue and none of them, including those holding senior positions had taken any action in this regard. There was a unanimous public response demanding that the concerned authorities take the matter seriously and take stringent and immediate action.

As a first step it was decided to stop the sale of alcohol through all sources other than licensed stores. It was decided that the Panchayat will issue notices immediately to ban the sale of liquor non licensed stores and the sale has stopped in vegetable and grocery stores, from the cycle, under the trees, etc.

However, this is a political issue and also a sensitive one. Most of the alcohol shops are owned by the 'Shettys', an upper caste. This being the case, the Panchayat President wants a memorandum to be submitted in order to close the licensed shops as well.

<sup>6</sup> Bhima Sangha: Union of working children in Karnataka facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children, with a membership of over 20,000 striving for the realisation of child rights.

<sup>7</sup> Country-made liquor in India

Mr. Nagappa, member of the Taluk Panchayat, is leading a people's movement in the Panchayat against alcoholism. He feels a strong memorandum from the Makkala Panchayat will be able to influence the Taluk and District authorities to pass the necessary order against all the alcohol shops in the village as an appeal from the Children's Panchayat has no political colouring. Moreover, it was the children who raised the issue in the first place and he feels that unless the adults' deal with this issue it is shameful and 'we will be doing wrong by our children'. He is organising a huge people's rally campaigning against alcoholism. By the end of December he is confident of declaring the entire Panchayat 'ALCOHOL-FREE'.

***He may be an alcoholic, but he is still our father.***

***A group of children representing the various wards of the Keradi Panchayat were putting together their demands to the Keradi Gram Panchayat prior to the Children's Grama Sabha Meeting. One of the issues they had decided to raise was the issue of alcoholism. I who was acting as the 'devils advocate' asked them why it was an issue for them. Many people in the village drink," they said. I said, "so what? That is their problem." Then they gave me several examples such as "the men folk come home late"; "they spend money on liquor"; "they fall all over the place". However, the "they fall all over the place" was a recurring theme. I said, "How does that bother you?" So they said, "you do not understand, they fall all over the place, on the road, in the bus stop!" I repeated my question once again.***

***They looked at me for a while and then they said, "but it is so embarrassing, they fall on the road and we find them there".***

***I again repeated my question. "But why should that bother YOU?"***

***Now the kids said "but they get hurt and then the family has to spend money on doctors and medicines and then there is less food at home. They also come home and shout at their wives and children and school children find it difficult to do their home work".***

***Then I said that those families and children should raise this issue not you.***

***The kids considered this for a long time; they were looking at me as if I was stupid or something. Didn't I understand that they were talking about their own fathers? That it was embarrassing to be told by your friend or classmate that your father was lying on the road? That if he got hurt they had less to eat?***

***I apologised but said that I still did not understand, why not let him lie there a few times that might teach him a lesson?***

***Now the kids were really puzzled. How could I be so dense? They all answered in unison. "We cannot do that, he is our father!"***

***I have always experienced the concern that children have for others, especially their family, but this was a revelation for me that even when their parent was obnoxious, abusive and causing them and their families great hardship; they still loved him. They were concerned about him and embarrassed for him.***

***The strategy that the children of Keradi later developed<sup>8</sup> to have liquor shops banned in Keradi demonstrated the same concern and affection. It was a strategy where no individual 'lost face', where no one person was targeted and no family used as a specific example.***

***It is this capacity of children to strive for a unanimous decision of all the stakeholders, without labelling any one group as the 'bad guys' that enables them to succeed in their struggles.***

***We have a lot to learn from them!***

*Source: Nandana Reddy, Director Development.*

*During discussions with Children at the Keradi Children's Grama Sabha Meeting, January 2002.*

<sup>8</sup> Please refer to case study on closing liquor shops in Keradi.

## Levels of participation:

Children's participation is no different from that of adults. Children may represent themselves as individuals

***In the early years Bhima Sangha did not have enough support, but once they grew stronger in membership, they were able to question adults if required. Some families tried to discourage them from being part of their organisation. At that time, children said "You may not want anything more from your lives, we do. We want the world." – Manjamma, Panchayat Member***

or be represented by their organisations or they may even represent their organisation. When they represent themselves, they tend to focus on issues that concern them personally. As members of an organisation they tend to voice larger/common concerns that in turn become the concerns of the organisation.

When children participate as representatives of their organisations they bring with them the mandate of their entire organisation. Their responsibilities increase, as they have to ensure the optimum use of opportunities to raise the issues of the members. This also implies a very high level of accountability and we have seen children's organisations that have several checks and balances in place to ensure that this accountability is respected and maintained.

It is important to point out that issues related to 'representation' should also be considered important for the participation of adults. How representative are we? How participatory are the processes we are part of? Should we not work towards ensuring these for adults as well?

Children may participate in formal or informal consultations. In both these scenarios, they may or may not be listened to and their inputs may or may not be taken on board. It is possible that children are a part of formal consultative structures – such as advisory boards – in which case there is a better chance of their opinions and concerns forming a part of the decision. Children may also be a part of joint decision making structures where children are an integral part of the decision making process. In this set up children have optimum impact.

Their contribution becomes most potent when they are using formal structures and spaces as representatives of their organisations and it is in this form and level of participation that they can most significantly contribute to policy level decision making processes.

Children's organisations and movements have multiple and unique histories. Their birth, evolution and maturity may take on different paths based on the context in which children function, on the issues they wish to address, on their ideological frame and vision.

The mechanisms for empowerment and the structures for participation should be created at all levels of decision-making from home to local governance. Only then will education become relevant to the lives of marginalised children and enable them to use this newfound knowledge to transform their lives and their schools. Crucial to this process are the need for structures and forums where children can participate in an organised and meaningful way. These structure need to apply to all the arenas of a child.

Children belonging to organisations, unions and movements in several parts of the world have begun to quite definitively define their own paradigm of development and reshape the world closer to their vision. They have made significant contributions to policies and programmes resulting in interventions that are (probably for the first time) appropriate and sustainable. They have questioned our perspectives and forced us to change.

The right of children to organise and participate in decisions regarding themselves does not mean that they have all the answers, nor does it mean that we, as adults, are absolved of our responsibilities towards our children. It is only giving them the first step towards being able to defend themselves and reshape their future. We must also be prepared for the fact that children will say things we do not necessarily agree with, they will ask embarrassing questions for which we do not have ready answers and they will disagree on the stands they take based on the differing realities they face. But we must be willing to accept this. The concerns of working children need to be put on the agenda and discussed. Their questions must be answered and only if we accept this challenge will we be any closer to finding solutions that work.



***Without organised pressure, without coordinated effort and a commitment to uphold our participation rights, no doors will open for us.***

Delegates of The First International Meeting of Working Children, Kundapura, 1996

*"We work in the market as coolies. The older coolies used to beat us. We thought that the adults are united. So no one harms them. Even powerful people don't trouble them. We said why couldn't we get united? We formed the Bal Mazdoor Union.*

*Babu, President of Bal Mazdoor Union, at the International Convention of Working Children organised by CWC, 1996*

#### **My dream city**

*My dream city is where there is no fighting at home. It should be peaceful and quiet with a bore well. If it is not working, the community should get it repaired. There should be a tank, which provides water round the year. Both rich and poor children should be treated and taught alike at school. If children make mistakes, they should not be beaten or made to stand in the hot sun. There should be a flag post, a playground and other facilities at the school. There should be water near the playground. There should be a hospital and everybody should be treated alike.*

*Factories should not be in residential areas. They should be at least 2km away. If they are too near, there will be smoke and waste, which will affect the health of the people. Factories should employ only those above 18 years of age. The Government should formulate legislation to implement the CRC.*

*There should be no discrimination between caste and the rich and poor. If a boy and a girl speak to each other and are friendly, it should not be misinterpreted.*

*Subramanyam, Bhima Sangha  
Excerpt from the Working Children's Report, Facilitated and Compiled by CWC, Published by Books of Change, 2000*

*Saraswathi, a member of Bhima Sangha, is 17 years old and has dropped out of school in the eighth standard. She works as a helper in an anganwadi and also has to do several household chores everyday. However, she still made time to take active part in conducting the survey.*

*While Saraswathi with her friends was surveying a household, she learnt that an elderly woman of the household was not receiving widow pension from the state, although she was eligible to get it. While surveying other households she discovered that there were a few other widows as well in the same fate. As they were engaged in the survey, they compiled a list of eligible people who were not receiving widow and/or old age pension. The very next day the researchers met the President of their Panchayat and informed him of the oversight and sought urgent action. With the assistance of the president the researchers obtained the appropriate application forms and filled the details in for the applicants who were mostly illiterate. The researchers then obtained signatures or thumb prints from the applicants and submitted them to the Panchayat officials and pressurised the latter to contact the concerned authorities. To their surprise the pensioners began to get their pension within a month.<sup>1</sup>*

*(An excerpt from 'Children and their Research: A Process Document by Inlichen P.J. published by CWC, 2002)*

#### **My dream village**

*My dream village should be peaceful. There should be river flowing by full of fish, tortoises and snakes. It should have sand and stones. There should be a coconut grove and many nurseries on the banks of the river. It should have a bridge.*

*There should be a forest to provide us with cool shades and firewood. It should always be green. It should be full of birds and animals, with trees that bear fruits and flowers.*

*The village should have a well, full of water. There should be a green grazing yard for the cattle to feed on. Everybody should have good houses to stay and toilets to use. Everybody should have an occupation and all the proper facilities. There should be a hospital, a Panchayat, a bank, shops, a hotel, a bus stand, an Anganawadi, streetlights and electricity. There should be land and electricity. There should be land for cultivation. The village should have a post office, a temple and good roads.*


*Schools should have appropriate education with a playground and flag post, and children should have time to play.*

*Ramesh, Bhima Sangha  
Excerpt from the Working Children's Report, Facilitated and Compiled by CWC, Published by Books of Change, 2000*

# LEVELS OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

NATURE OF PARTICIPATION

WITHIN THE FRAME OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS,  
DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES AND  
PERSONHOOD

REPRESENTING ORGANISATION								
REPRESENTED THROUGH THE ORGANISATION								
REPRESENTING ONESELF								

INFORMAL INTERACTION

INFORMAL CONSULTATION

FORMAL CONSULTATIVE

FORMAL JOINT DECISION MAKING

## STRUCTURE

Adult initiated

Child initiated

Jointly initiated



### DINESH'S STORY

*I was in Kundapur on one of my regular visits and was invited to attend a meeting of Bhima Sangha, an organisation of, by and for working children. There was a tiny boy there, Dinesh. He looked six years old but turned out to be eight. To me he seemed too young to attend such a meeting and I made a note to ask our field activists about this later, when Dinesh began to speak. "We want our own forest (Namma Kadu)", he said, "And in that forest we the children of Bhima Sangha will grow bamboo and cane for our parents to make baskets with. We will grow the grass needed for making mats and trees for fuel. We will also grow trees that will attract birds. We will grow the trees necessary for bees to make honey and make a pond for fish and lotuses. The earth dug out to make the pond will be used for building houses and making pots. We will also plant edible and medicinal herbs.*

*"We will plant this forest ourselves and when this forest has grown we will protect it and use it only for our needs. No trees will be cut, only branches, because a tree takes a long time to grow. After that we will let loose animals that our parents told us used to be in the forests in this area, but only after the trees have grown, or else animals like rabbits will eat the plants before they become trees."*

*"How will you get the land?", I asked, "we will ask the Tasildar" he said. "What if he does not give it to you?" "We will ask the District Collector." "What if he refuses as well?" "How can he refuse us we are Bhima Sangha?" "What if he still does?" "We will sit in his office until he agrees."*

*The children from different villages is which we work had come together to discuss what they could do to help their parents increase the viability of their traditional occupations, so that they themselves could stay on in the village and not to forced to migrate to the cities. Among the problems that were discussed was the increasing non-availability of raw material, costly production processes and shrinking local markets.*

*The first two problems are because the community has no access to common lands or forest produce any more. This has been compounded by the fact that 'city made' products made of plastic, rayon and steel have flooded their markets and replace traditional products, making these communities totally dependent on what is left of their consumers, who in most cases are the economically weakest sections, or, on so called government schemes and subsidies.*

*Little Dinesh's remarks were precipitated by this and a recent incident. He and his friends used to meet and play in a wood near his village, one of the last patches of forest that covered the area from the Kundapur coast to the hills near Shimoga. While playing these children used to also collect twigs and fallen branches as fuel to cook the evening meal. When our field activist started visiting them they naturally chose this forest for their classes and meetings. Soon the local 'Yeajaman' (landlord) came to know of this and prevented them from using this space for fear that they might claim it as their own.*

*Now Dinesh and his friends have to walk miles to collect fuel every day and for Dinesh this was the epitome of injustice. His solution was a forest that would be grown by the children and protected and used by the community for their needs.*

*In preparation for this the children decided to make a list of all the trees that the forest should have, the nurseries where they were available and during which seasons they should be planted. They also decided to learn how to make natural compost, start growing saplings and begin by supplying vegetable seeds and plants to their parents for kitchen gardens.*

*Besides this they also decided to visit all the near by village markets an shops and find out what traditional products were being sold, for how much and where they were produced. This they felt would give their parents an idea of retail prices, profit margins and the diversity of product designs. They decide to find their own solutions to their and their parent's problems.*

*Dinesh's dream is slowly taking root and seeing him at dusk the evening I left, a tiny figure silhouetted against the dusty road with a load of fire wood larger than himself on his head, but still waving merrily to us, it is possible to believe that these little children, with their inner strength, the tenacity and faith that they can make things happen, may just make their dreams come true and a forest of trees, sown by little working fingers, will begin to bloom in the area.*

*However, some do not agree with Dinesh and do not believe in his solutions. Instead they argue that we are regressing towards primitivism and backwardness; little realising that the model they pedal is not a sustainable one.*

*(By Nandana Reddy, 1992)*

## **Participation as protagonism:**

The young persons we work with have experienced the strength of their organisations and forums such as the Bhima Sangha<sup>9</sup>, Makkala Panchayats<sup>10</sup> and Namma Sabha<sup>11</sup>. For these children participation is not just an opportunity to take part in meetings, to be consulted occasionally, or to sing a song at an inaugural function. For them participation is a means to advocate for their own cause and transform their situations. For them participation is a political intervention irrespective of the arena in which they participate. For them, participation is protagonism in the true sense of the word.

They are struggling to the fight injustice they face and are working to build a better world. They are fighting the same battles as those fought by the working class and women's movements. They face the same questions regarding their ability, their intentions and their integrity. They are struggling for their right of entry into political space. They are making tremendous sacrifices because this struggle means a lot to them.

It is this experience with children, that has defined our view of children's participation and we have developed mechanisms/structures, methodologies and tools to strengthen these processes.

We believe that children must be given the right to intervene in their environment and change elements that do not uphold their rights as children.

### **VANAJA'S STORY**

*Vanaja is a mischievous little tomboy. Vanaja was the first girl who graduated from our Appropriate Construction Technology programme. She comes from a small village called Kalavara on the foothills of the Western Ghats in India. She heads a construction group and now lives in Kanyana Village on her own. She was a member of Bhima Sangha<sup>9</sup> and is now a member of Namma Sabha<sup>1</sup>.*

*When Vanaja was twelve years old, her father was incapacitated and her mother was fighting a losing battle to feed the family. Vanaja was desperate to learn a skill and to join the CWC's vocational training programme. The course she chose was Appropriate Construction Technology, a male dominated profession. Vanaja was aware of the difficulties her choice would bring but she stood her ground. She is now a full member of a construction group.*

*They had contracts that keep them booked for six months and Vanaja was earning more than the minimum wage for skilled masons. She bought herself a bicycle and paid for the treatment of her ailing sister. She made small repairs at home and the roof does not leak any more in the monsoon. She enjoys her work and the freedom it gives her. She is now a proud young woman doing very well in a man's world. Recently she lead an amazing struggle for 'land for the landless' and succeeded.*

*Vanaja and some others had built houses on open land belonging to the Gram Panchayat while they waited for their applications for land under 'land for the scheme' to be processed.*

*However there was a complaint against Vanaja from one of the landowners to the Gram Panchayat. They did not like the idea of a young girl living alone. About a week ago the Panchayat bill collector came visiting this colony and took down details such as name, place of birth etc.*

*Two days later the Secretary of the Gram Panchayat came asking questions. Who had given her permission to build on government land, how much did she pay in bribes etc.*

*Vanaja began answering. She said that the land was empty and she had paid no one any bribe. Why should she pay a bribe for government land?*

*Continued...*

<sup>9</sup> Bhima Sangha is a union of working children in Karnataka facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children, with a membership of over 13,000.

<sup>10</sup> Makkala Panchayats are children's elected councils. They are the forums through which all children of a Panchayat participate in decision-making and governance.

<sup>11</sup> Namma Sabha is a union of young professionals and artisans. Young people who were members of Bhima Sangha set this up.

**Vanaja's story continued:**

*The Secretary obviously did not like Vanaja's boldness and wanted to know why someone from another Panchayat should come here? People from other Panchayats were not entitled to get land here.*

*Vanaja wanted to know whether everyone had to live and die where they were born. Didn't people go to other places in search of work? And Vanaja proceeded to give him a list of examples. Others in the colony joined in to support Vanaja. The Secretary was incensed. He said that she had no rights. How could such a chit of a girl speak to him like this? He left swearing to teach her a lesson.*

*The next day Vanaja heard that the Secretary had decided to tear down her house and another 17. Vanaja was appalled; because of her others were going to suffer. She decided to go and apologise to the Secretary, she begged him not to harm the others but he would have nothing of it. .*

*Two days later he returned accompanied by two policemen, a few members of the Panchayat, landlords and two trucks. Vanaja and the others in the colony were just preparing their evening meal. The children of some of the households were eating. Without warning, without having issued any notice they proceeded to demolish 18 homes. Vanaja's was the first.*

*She and the others just sat and watched the destruction for three hours. Their things were thrown out in heaps, the food emptied on the ground, their fires put out.*

*They were asked to clear away their belongings including the wrecked building material. Vanaja refused saying that they had nowhere else to go. Then the Secretary proceeded to auction their belongings.*

*They decided to protest. Vanaja led the protest with all the effected families and others from that village. The Youth Association and the Dalit Sangha joined them. Many Panchayat members from other Panchayats belonging to all political parties supported them.*

*They first filed a complaint with the Police Station at the Taluk Head Quarters and proceeded to the Taluk Panchayat Office to lodge their complaint. By that time the members of the Taluk Panchayat realised that a big mistake had been committed. The auctioning of the material was wrong, a criminal offence. They promised to settle the matter. Their offer was 3 cents of land, return of the material and 500 rupees to rebuild the houses. Vanaja refused. She insisted that the Panchayat rebuild the houses.*

*To ensure that this would happen they camped on the veranda of the Gram Panchayat, slept there, cooked their food there and slung their babies in makeshift cradles hung from the roof.*

*A week later Vanaja's house had been rebuilt and the others nearly completed. The members that supported the eviction had to resign. Action was taken against the Secretary.*

*Vanaja invited the Secretary and the others responsible for the inauguration and house warming.*

*Vanaja is a local heroine. It is likely that she will be asked to stand for the next election and she will win. She says that she has proved that one who did not have any rights was able to fight and procure these rights. She may be young and a girl but she has proved that struggles for justice have no age bar. She has just turned 18.*

*(Written by Nandana Reddy, 2001)*

## **Personhood, child development and children's rights:**

Children's engagement among themselves and with adults has to be seen within three important frameworks by those of us who wish to initiate or enhance children's participation. We need to recognise and respect the personhood of children, have knowledge about child development and understand and internalise children's rights.

Getting to know a child, as an individual in her/his own right is not easy to achieve. On first meeting a child, there are several factors, which influence the understanding of that child. More often than not, bias and social stereotyping influence this understanding.

Often children are categorised by the way policy and programmes are designed. Children categorised as one constituency may actually have diverse needs. For instance 'working children' or 'children in bondage'. While planning interventions, all children of one 'category' may be assumed to have common characteristics – such as 'all working children are voiceless' or 'all children in bondage are ignorant'.

The assumption is that children within a category are homogeneous. As a result the individual characteristics of each child, their individual strengths, their specific concerns and interests get overlooked.

Often children end up conforming to these descriptions of themselves. For instance, a girl may see herself as more dis-empowered than her male counterparts and a ***Harijan***<sup>12</sup> boy may think of himself as down trodden. While this may be true within the existing socio-economic and cultural situation of that child, these perceptions cannot be allowed to undermine the 'inner character and qualities of the child'. It is this inner character of a child which defines her/his individuality and personality.

Many of our interventions fail because we do not take into consideration each individual child and tailor our responses to cater to them. Further we do not enable children to recognise their inherent strengths so that they may build on these and use them to transform their situations.

In order to do this we need to find ways to reach the inner child and assist children to recognise their strengths and assist them to overcome their shortcomings. It is critical to build relationships with children that are based on mutual trust, affection and most of all respect. Only then will we be better equipped to constantly question, challenge and change the stereotypes and prejudices surrounding children.

When children were drafting their definition of 'Work we Can and Cannot do'<sup>13</sup> they initially felt that many forms of that they were performing were actually acceptable; the reason being, that were able to do it. It is only when they examined the same work within the perspective of their rights and more importantly, their developmental milestones that they began to distinguish between work that was acceptable and unacceptable.

There is a distinct difference between children's perceived needs and their rights and we adults often confuse our perceptions of children's needs with children's rights.

### **Reinforcing Children's Personhood:**

As children gain a better understanding of their personhood, they begins to recognise their inherent strengths and weakness as well as identify the opportunities and constraints that are present in their external environment. Often the realisation that many of the factors they thought were their personal weakness and constraints are external and can be addressed and overcome gives children tremendous strength.

During this process, it is very important to remember that children's identities are also linked to their gender, their communities, their ethnic/religious groups etc. While the discriminatory aspects of socialisation are being addressed, we have to ensure that the positive aspects of socialisation are strengthened, if not children may begin to lose their sense of identity and their social contexts. If that happens, they will not be able to counter the negative aspects of socialisation that are deep rooted and have either vocal or silent social sanctions. This should not be seen as a 'break with the past' exercise but a constructive one of consolidating the positive aspects of identity. This process of reinforcing their strength and opportunities gives children a stronger sense of their personhood.

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<sup>12</sup> A social lower caste in the Indian caste hierarchy

<sup>13</sup> 'Work we can and cannot do', a document by Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayat, 1999.

### PREMA'S STORY

*Prema is a very poised young girl. She lives in a tiny village called Uppunda that nestles between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats in South India. It is a fishing village. Prema and her family belong to a low cast in the social hierarchy. The boys in her family are taught how to fish and the girls and women run the home and do all the menial chores. A primary occupation is the collection of firewood from the forests on the slopes of the foothills. This means waking up at 2 am, walking 10 to 11 kilometres and returning with a head load of firewood by afternoon.*

*Prema went to school for a few years but found it impossible. She could not learn anything. Nothing made sense to her. The teacher could not manage the class of 100 children. He used to scream at the top of his voice and make the children repeat the alphabet and numerals after him. She found no relevance in what was being taught in school to her life. It did not help her to cope with her domestic problems; there was no information on health. It did not help her understand the physical and emotional changes she was experiencing. It did not tell her about reproduction, the protection of her body or childcare. School did not help her to deal with the forest guards when she went to collect the firewood, or show her ways of coping with her position as a girl from a low cast family in a patriarchal community. Instead, Prema was treated badly in school because of her cast. Finally her teacher told her that she was only good for carrying cow dung and breaking fish heads. She felt humiliated and she left school like many others. After four years of schooling she could barely read the alphabet.*

*Learning is fundamental and inseparable from engagement in the world. Knowledge is integrated in the life of communities; learning is how people gain membership and participation in community. Learning is an act of membership; motivation in learning lies in the intimate relation between the desire for participation and the role of new knowledge in enabling that participation. Knowing depends on engagement in practice, only in the classroom is knowledge presented in the abstract. Engagement is inseparable from empowerment. Failure to learn is the result of exclusion from participation; people denied membership with the right to contribute in the creation of meaning cannot sufficiently engage to learn easily.<sup>14</sup>*

*After her disastrous experience in school, Prema joined Bhima Sangha, a union for, by and of working children. She was able to share her problems and frustrations and gain great strength from knowing that there were others like her. Collectively they began to find solutions to the problems they faced and Prema's self confidence grew.*

*However the children were not satisfied with this. They wanted all the children of an area or village to come together. With our help they set up a 'Makkala Panchayat' or children's local government in five districts of Karnataka, a State in South India. All the children of a 'Panchayat' elect a parallel children's government. This election is held by the formal government administration and the secretary of the adult Panchayat acts as the secretary of the children's Panchayat. A Task Force that is chaired by the District Minister links the adult and children's Panchayats.*

*Prema was elected to the 'Makkala Panchayat' in her village and she became the President. At this time all the children decided that they needed more information about the causes of child labour and the resources available in their communities if they were to influence their local governments to take corrective action. They decided to do a house-to-house survey in 12000 households and asked us, the Concerned for Working Children (CWC) for help to design this piece of research. Prema supervised the survey in her cluster of villages.*

*During this process Prema had to interview her old teacher and his family. She was also the one to present the findings to the adult 'Panchayat' and argue the demands made by the children, her electorate. She managed to get all the demands accepted and many of them have been effectively addressed such as the implementation of a more appropriate and quality education, full day child care centres, easy access to fuel, fodder and water, the construction of foot bridges and more freedom for girls.*

*Her moment of glory came when her old teacher stood up in a 'Panchayat' meeting and honoured her. He was amazed at her capacity to handle the complexity of the survey and her presentation skills. He apologised for what he had said when she was in school and praised her intelligence and leadership qualities.*

*Prema is now a respected and proud member of her community. She not only reads and writes, but also represents her constituency in national and international meetings. She has travelled to many countries. Recently she made a big impression on the children of Japan who have as a result initiated a Children's Rights Movement in Japan. Prema now stands tall. Her dream is to become the president of the local government – a dream that is more than likely to come true.*

*(Written by Nandana Reddy, 1997)*

<sup>14</sup> Martin Woodhead – at the Child Rights Conference, Kathmandu, May 2000.

## **Children's reasons for participation and protagonism:**

**Children's participation:** Participation is a natural instinct. From the moment they are born, children begin to participate. They participate in order to communicate and to establish links with their environment. They participate in order to gain an identity and a membership in the community. They find meaning in their lives through their participation. Gradually, through their participation, they intervene in their external environments.

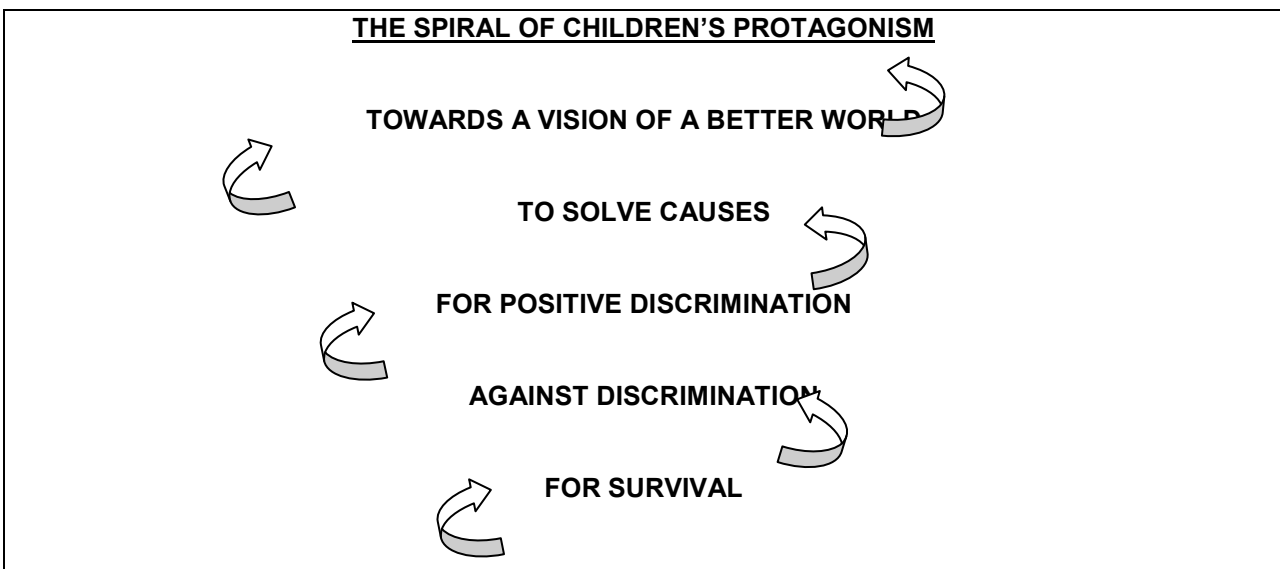
**Children's protagonism:** The spiral of Children's Protagonism<sup>15</sup> illustrates the reasons for children's protagonism and was arrived at based on the history and evolution of the working children's movements from around the world.

### For survival:

For children who are in difficult circumstances, marginalised and oppressed, their first and foremost need is that of survival, obtaining basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter and the livelihood to get these.

### To end discrimination:

Once basic needs are met the need to end discrimination would become important. For example, working children would demand equal pay for equal work, etc.



### For positive discrimination:

Once the above is accomplished the next step would be to demand and access rights that are due to them as children. For example, working children would demand that they work fewer hours than adults do and have access to quality education in their free time that is compatible to the formal system and appropriate to their needs.

### To solve causes:

The solving of causes or the redefining of structures that oppress and marginalise children would be their next area of concern. For example, eradicating poverty, strengthening the services available to children and increasing the employment opportunities for the adults in their communities. This would also include the participation of children in governance.

### To realise a vision of a new world:

<sup>15</sup> Conceived by the Concerned for Working Children 1995.



And finally children would like to intervene in reshaping society closer to their vision of the world they would like to live in. This would demand that adults enter into a democratic partnership with them.

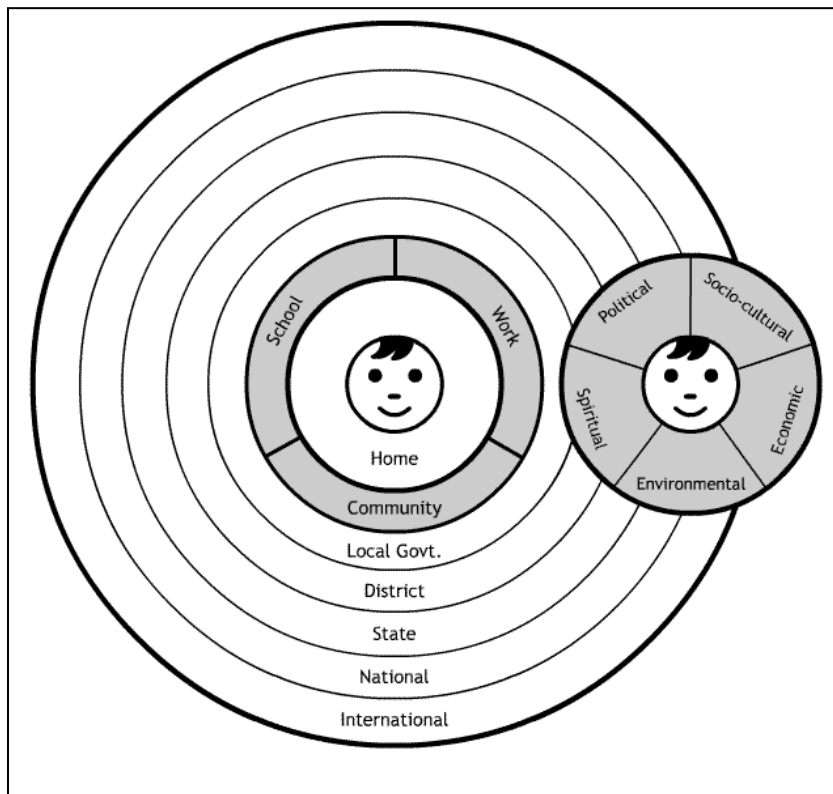
**Forms of children's participation:**

Children’s participation can take numerous forms. Thousands of children are members of Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayats. They demonstrate participation in so many new and different ways. Ways that we adults sometimes fail to notice or recognise. The fact that a child has walked 7 kilometres to a meeting, the fact that she had to work harder and quicker to finish her household chores, the fact that he had to bring along his baby sister and mind her – these are all acts of participation – even if at the meeting the child may seem quiet or less vocal than other children. It is an act of solidarity, an act of belonging and commitment to the group and most of all a personal contribution to a larger cause. Participation therefore is not restricted to meetings or formal platforms.

**Arenas:**

Each child is a complex individual with a unique social, cultural, political, social, environmental and spiritual identity. This identity is critical to the child and yet a dynamic one, continuously transforming through interactions with the external world as well as through internal reflections.

Children constantly interact with other children and adults in a wide range of arenas. Starting with their respective families and going up to the international forums, children can and sometimes do interact and influence processes.



Children who seek to participate encounter many obstacles, within their own homes and outside. They have to constantly negotiate in order to make time and space for themselves.

We should also remember that when a child participates in a platform or forum that is visible to us adults, such as conferences, that child has probably negotiated at several levels, home, work, school, community, peers, etc. in order to be there. This would mean participation in all these arenas. Our responsibility as adult facilitators is to enable and equip children to handle this.

may use this to reduce the pressures

untable. This participation in political s women; tribal communities etc. to democracy.

*The government has done something for school going children. It has done nothing for working children. We can't wait for the government to solve all our problems"*

**Geetha Nagoor, Bhima Sangha, at the International Convention of Working Children organised by CWC, 1996**

CWC works with children who work and we cover about 20,000 children in 5 districts in Karnataka. We are planning to upscale to 50 Panchayats and 6 urban centres in the next five years. Our project is called **Makkala**

**Toofan** and is basically a three to five year intervention in a given Panchayat or urban centre.

The aim is to ensure in the first phase that Panchayats are child labour free<sup>16</sup> and the second phase is to ensure that the Panchayats are child rights friendly. The children we work with wanted all the children of an area or village to come together. With our help they set up '**Makkala Panchayats**' or children's local governments in five districts of Karnataka, a State in South India. All the children of a '**Panchayat**' elect a parallel children's government.

This election is held by the formal government administration and the secretary of the adult Panchayat acts as the secretary of the children's Panchayat. A Task Force that is chaired by the District Minister links the adult and children's Panchayats.

The children of these villages have chosen a children's friend or '**Makkala Mitra**' for each village. These people act a bit like children's Ombudspersons, protecting the rights of children and intervening on their request. As a result of this, '**Panchayats**<sup>17</sup>' are able to not only declare themselves child labour free but also child friendly. This programme '**Makkala Toofan**<sup>18</sup>' or children's typhoon has enabled systemic changes that formalise political space for children.

Through their organised participation in local governance these children obtain an identity that children of this age group desperately require according to the stages of their development. They make the state accountable through their participation in political structures. This participation in political space by children also enables other marginalised groups such as women, ethnic groups, etc. to change their immediate situation and strengthen and redefine democracy.

Thousands of children are now participating in the governance of their villages. Adults that were traditionally feudal, patriarchal and gender insensitive have become the advocates for Children's Rights. Many of them do not even know about the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They see a value in the active and equal participation of children as they have seen this translated into overall benefit for the whole community.

***We have been able to influence our local governments and are involved in planning for our villages. Now we have found solutions that did not seem possible when we did not have our own organisation and link structures.***

Nagaraj Kolkere, Founder President  
Bhima Sangha, 1996

#### **THE STORY OF THE NADEDHATA**

***The children we work with in partnership in four Districts of Karnataka are extremely innovative in finding ways to get the State Administration to listen to them and act on their demands. One interesting example is the Nadedhata (a walkathon) they undertook.***

***At the time we were working in about 25 villages in the Kundapura Taluk of South Kanara. The children had several issues that they wanted addressed and had very little success with the local officials and their Gram Panchayats. So they decided to take these issues up at the Taluk Level.***

***They realised that just meeting officials in their offices and handing over petitions would get them no where, they would just be thrown into the waste basket. They also did not want to go on the confrontation mode, as this would breed antagonism, so they decided to devise another scheme.***

***Some of them had learned Yekshaghana (a traditional form of dance drama specific to Karnataka) and they decided to use this.***

<sup>16</sup> Child labour-free means:-

- No children have to do work that is detrimental to their normal growth and development
- No children migrate from the Panchayat for employment
- All children in the Panchayat get an education that is appropriate to them and compatible to the formal system

<sup>17</sup> Panchayat is the lowest level of administration in the system of local government. The term Panchayat refers to both the geographical and administrative units, as well as the elected body, which acts as the local council. A Panchayat is composed of a cluster of villages and several Panchayats constitute a Taluk.

<sup>18</sup> This is a programme of comprehensive development with primary focus on the empowerment of children. It aims at enabling children to play a proactive role in decision-making and governance

*They decided that some of them would dress up in Yekshaghana costumes depicting a King and Queen and their court of Ministers and of course a Court Jester.*

*They would walk from village to village and collect petitions from children and adults alike and the concerned Ministers would put them into a sack that each of them carried.*

*The walkathon was to culminate in Kundapur Town at a large playground where all the Government Officials had been invited together with the general public. There had planned some entertainment such as dances and songs and the highlight was the Yekshaghana.*

*More than 3000 people had turned up and the ground was packed. The officials were in the front rows.*

*Then the Yekshaghana began. The King talked about justice and how well he had ruled over the land. The Queen talked about all the things she had done for the women and children and then they began to hold court.*

*Each Minister was asked to step forward and state his business. As they did so they began pulling out the petitions from their sack and reading out the complaints. The Court Jester would comment and make some jokes. The crowd loved it.*

*Then the King asked the Minister who was responsible for all these problems and the Minister would name an official. The King then proceeded to summon him or her from the front rows of the audience. It was difficult for these officials to refuse. The audience by now was cheering and repeating the call of the king. It being a play no one was sure how real all this was.*

*The official would come up on the stage and then he was asked to explain. At first they tried to pass it off with some irrelevant remark. For example to a question of "why is there no water in Alur (a Panchayat in Kundapur Taluk)?" the official replied, "Because we have had no rain". To this the Court Jester would remind him of his obligation and recommend that the King ordered 20 lashings or 'off with his head'. By this time the audience was demanding a responsible reply and the official had to make a firm commitment. He was then pardoned and let off.*

*The children went on like this till the sacks were empty all the while maintaining the surreal mood of the play and the Jester lightening the atmosphere with his quips. By the end all the officials had made some commitment or the other and audience were witness.*

*This event enabled the children to follow up on all these issues and several were addressed. Public distribution outlets were shifted to more convenient locations, several villages got electricity, foot bridges, day care centres, drinking water and teachers for schools.*

*The children were able to maintain a good relationship with the officials and as a result they were respected both by their communities and Government Officials. Subsequently the children decided to formalise this interaction with Government and the Makkala Panchayats (Children's Panchayats) were born.*

*Children still use the Yekshaghana and several other folk forms to spread awareness and put their messages across*

*(By Nandana Reddy, 1995)*

## **Arenas of participation are also arenas of learning:**

Learning and participation are two faces of the same coin. One learns through participation and one also learns in order to participate. When the quality of participation is high the learning is also high. When there is little or no participation, learning is little or low and one tends to absorb stereotypes and biases.

## **Children's Participation in Governance:**

*"The Children's Grama Sabha (public hearings) of the Keradi Panchayat should become a role model for all Panchayats in India"*

*Vinay Kumar Sorake,  
Member of  
Parliament, India*

Many adult organisations have decided to keep children away from politics as it is corrupt, dirty and dangerous. While protecting children from violence and harm is important and necessary, this should not prevent or deny children the possibility and the right to intervene in their external environments in order to change it. It is our obligation to enable children to find ways to do this given the specifics of each context. Protecting children from harm and keeping them from the 'front line' must be one of our constant and deepest concerns. Protecting children from vulnerable situations and enabling children to participate in governance are issues that are interlinked, but one does not deny the other.

We cannot wait for an utopia of participatory democracy in our countries for children to exercise their agency viz a viz issues that concern them immediately and deeply. That would be closing a huge door on their participation possibilities just because we are unable to find the ways and means. It is also true that most of the problems children face are due to government policies and programmes and they need to address these. Our closing the avenues to their participation in governance is denying them their possibility and right because of our inability to startegise for the context. We have also seen that the Makkala Panchayats, Bhima Sangha and Namma Sabha have actually had a positive impact on the ethics of the Local Government and their functioning, making it more transparent, democratic and participatory. Children can make a difference even in very patriarchal, paternalistic, feudal, violent and corrupt situations. For example Unchengamma's struggle against child marriage in Hollagundi, the banning of arrack (alcohol) in N. Seeranhalli, the replacement of the Doctor at the local PHC, the disbursement of housing loans and the overall expenditure by the Panchayats. The result is a humanisation of the adults of the community and the entry of a new ethic with regard to governance and all dealings. So rather than the children being influenced by adult behaviour, children have changed adult behaviour for the better. Our responsibility is to constantly monitor the situation and ensure that children are not in any danger or possible harm.

The ideal model or strategy would be a combination of interventions addressing structure, process and agency. It is important to remember that experiments that are focused only on processes divested of links to formal structures cannot be mainstreamed or upscaled, holistic models can.

#### **CHILDREN'S GRAMA SABHA AT KERADI**

*More than a thousand children of Keradi Panchayat took part in the first ever children's Grama Sabha which was successfully conducted on January 29<sup>th</sup>. They made detailed presentations regarding the issues and problems they identified related to education, basic facilities, personal problems, gender discrimination, disability and child labour. Their audience included Sri. Vinay Kumar Sorake, MP, members of the Taluk and Gram Panchayats, Government officials from the District and Panchayat levels.*

*The event in Keradi takes on a special significance because Keradi is an extremely remote Panchayat in Kundapura Taluk located in the Western Ghats that has been ignored for several decades by the political parties as well as governmental administrators. The children of Keradi are giving the local Panchayats a new lease of life with their active involvement in not only identifying the problems they face, but also proposing solutions.*

*Responding to the creative and powerful presentations made by children, Sri. Sorake said, " This Grama Sabha is exemplary. Children have pointed out very specific problems and have also suggested specific solutions. All their points have been backed with detailed statistics. Most often the adult Panchayats or the concerned departments do not have such in-depth information. I highly appreciate the fact that children first conducted surveys and held discussions among themselves before presenting the points here. This children's Gramasabha, held in Keradi, one of the most remote Panchayats of Karnataka, should become a role model for all Panchayats".*

*Mr. Sorake made a personal commitment to go into each of the problems raised and to discuss them with the concerned departments. He suggested that periodic reviews be held to monitor how the officials and the elected representatives will act upon the children's demands.*

*"Until now, hardly any one had bothered to ask us what we thought or felt. This is the first time we had such an opportunity. We can solve some of our problems ourselves. For the others, the adults will have to be responsible. We will make them responsible" said Sukumar, the Vice President of the Keradi Children's Panchayat.*

*Children and their family members had walked long distances to take part in this event that they described was like a village festival (oora habba). Prior to this, 8-ward level Grama Sabhas had been conducted where children had taken part in child-rights workshops, discussed issues and spent several hours on creative activities. Children of each of the wards had displayed their products in Keradi along with the wall-news magazines prepared, a testimony to their pride and sense of achievement.*

*A press release by the Concerned for Working Children, January 31, 2002*

For example, the Toofan strategy works for Karnataka, given the reality of children's lives there. The same strategy would work in other parts of India and the region provided the principles are replicated, and not parts of the structures or processes. One would have to find suitable hooks to hang this on depending on the context, but the principles are universal.

The question is not one of replication but of translating 'principles' and picking up isolated elements from an integrated strategy cannot do this. For example, if the concept of the Makkala Mitra or Children's Friend were replicated in isolation it would not work in quite the same way. Who would elect the Children's Friend? Who would s/he be accountable to? What would be her/his support structure?

### **Role of adults:**

The Ladder of Participation by Roger Hart<sup>19</sup> is often used to represent levels of children's participation. However what it depicts are not levels of children's participation but the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation. It denotes the control and influence adults have over the process of children's participation. It also indicates adult responses to children's participation.

The term 'Ladder' is a misnomer as it implies a sequence, where as in reality one level may not necessarily lead to the next level; for instance, manipulation of children may not lead to children being used as decoration as a natural next step. If we take it that Roger Hart depicts a wide spectrum of scenarios of adult roles viz a viz children's participation that range from the negative to the positive, we suggest a modified version of the same as follows:

**1. Active resistance:** There are adults who actively resist children's participation. These adults belong to several categories. Some of them feel that children should not be burdened with participation. Some believe that children do not have the capacity to participate and hence cannot make informed choices. Some hold the view that children are very easy to manipulate and hence their participation may be used only to further adult agendas. Some adults in this category take very strong positions against children's participation and actually mobilise support and lobby against it. They do so because they are very aware of the power of children's participation and hence do not want to forfeit their power.

**2. Hindrance:** There are adults who hinder children's participation. Some of them may be against children's participation and they may come in the way of children's participation either overtly or covertly. They block opportunities for children and discourage children from participating. There are others in this category that may voice their support to children's participation, but the manner in which they interact with children may actually hinder children's participation. They may intentionally or unintentionally undermine the ability of children and may end up making children feel inadequate and reluctant to participate.

**3. Manipulation:** There are adults who manipulate children. Some adults in this scenario use children to further their own agendas. They may coach children to voice what they want or cleverly interpret what children say/do to suit their own interests. Sometimes this manipulation is very obvious, yet often it may be quite subtle – and may be carried out in ways children find very difficult to notice, let alone counter.

There are other adults who may manipulate children in order to 'get the best performance' out of them – and according to the adults, this may be done in the best interest of the child. Sometimes manipulation takes on emotional overtones as children often have emotional ties with the adults they interact with closely.

Manipulation is a very subtle and sensitive area. This critique has been often used to discredit children's participation. Even the best child facilitators could end up manipulating children unintentionally and unconsciously. The only way to guard against this is to be constantly vigilant.

**4. Decoration:** There are adults who treat children more or less like decorative objects, where they are expected to basically add colour to the proceedings. Children are called to present bouquets or sing songs – and not much is made of their presence.

**5. Tokenism:** There are adults who bring in children to take mileage from their presence and pretend that children have been given opportunities to participate. \_\_The adults may not manipulate children to speak on

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<sup>19</sup>Children's participation - From Tokenism to Citizenship', Roger Hart, UNICEF, 1992

their behalf, yet they do 'use' the presence of children to be counted as 'advocates of children's rights' and to be politically correct.

**6. Tolerance:** There are adults who bear with the notion of children's participation as some one higher up (such as a donor agency) thinks it is important. In some cases, children themselves may have demanded to be listened to. Adults then go through some consultative exercises with children but do not give any value or credit to the process or the outcome.

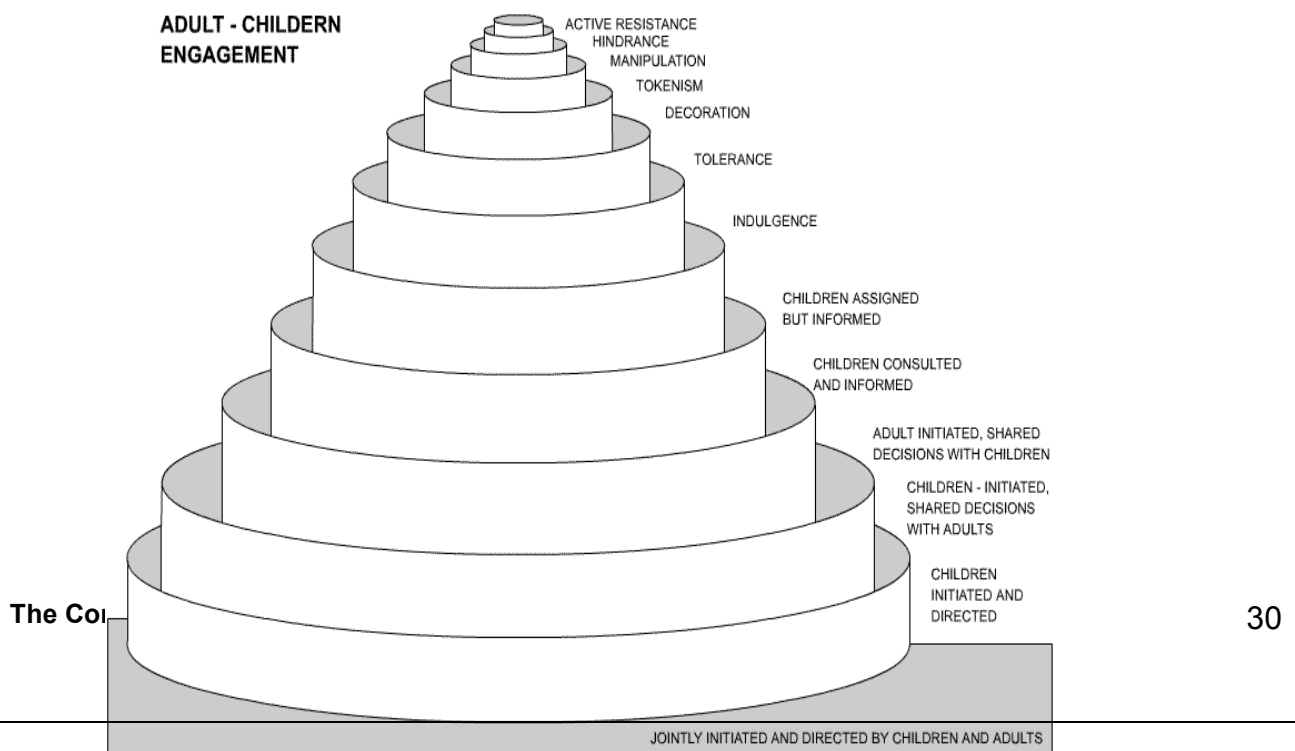
**7. Indulgence:** There are adults who find children's participation 'cute' and 'interesting' and are willing to provide limited spaces for children to voice their opinions. They keep prompting children to speak up and try to keep the environment friendly. They may listen to the opinions expressed by children with interest, but may not follow them up with seriousness. These are mostly one time events and very little comes out of such 'participation'.

**8. Children assigned but informed:** There are adults who work with children with some seriousness. The adults in this category decide on what needs to be done, but keep children well informed. They encourage children to be actively involved in the activities. They will guide children to implement the task, but do not expect children to input into the larger design of the process.

**9. Children consulted and informed:** Some adults believe in consulting children and keeping them involved. The adults take the lead role but inform the children about the situation and seek their opinion. They try to give children a sense of ownership over some aspects of the process, but under their supervision. The adults are still in control over the process, but they keep it flexible to incorporate the suggestions and concerns of the children.

**10. Adult initiated, shared decisions with children:** There are adults who initiate a process or a programme, but are clearly willing to share the decision making space with the children. They see it as a collaborative interaction. Even though initiated by them, they make it a joint effort. Here too children and adults may take on different roles, yet those roles are defined by mutual consent.

**11. Children – initiated, shared decisions with adults:** There are children and their organisations that call the first shot, and invite adults to collaborate with them. Children ensure that adults are jointly involved in deciding what needs to be done and share the ownership of the process and the outcome. Within the collaboration, children and adults may take on different roles, yet those roles are defined by mutual consent.



**12. Children initiated and directed:** There are children and their organisations that are in total control and they may or may not involve the adults. If they do decide to involve the adults, they will work out the framework in which the adults are to participate. Children will continue to keep the process under their control and will have the total ownership of the process and the outcome.

**13. Jointly initiated and directed by children and adults:** There are adults and children who have developed a partnership and they jointly initiate and direct the processes. They have joint ownership of the idea, the process and the outcome. They may play different roles, based on mutual consent. This relationship is possible only when both the adults and children are empowered and are able to pool their respective strengths to achieve a common objective, in partnership with each other.

These roles neither are watertight compartments nor are they purely black or white scenarios. Thirteen of them have been spelt out, yet there is a wide range of shades between them. We have seen adults play all these roles sometimes intentionally or unintentionally. It is possible that the same group of adults play one or several of these roles with the same group of children or different groups of children at different times.

But in situations where children have control over their own spaces and participation, they are in a position to negotiate with adults from a point of strength. They can then actively determine the roles each of them take on in a given situation. It is this, which actually determines the level of children's participation.

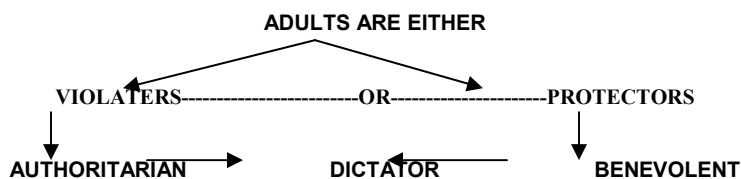
There are some who argue that the responsibility or duties of adults decrease with children's participation. This however is not true. There is actually a relationship of direct proportion between children's participation and adult responsibility. An example we often use is that of a pet dog. Keeping the dog shut in a kennel, putting the dog on a leash and allowing the dog to roam free implies different degrees of responsibility on the part of the caregiver. Keeping a dog in a kennel requires very little from the care giver, where as allowing the dog to roam free requires the care giver to enable the dog to cross a street, protect itself and find its way home, provide a safe environment, among other things. In all three cases the caregiver is providing for and protecting the pet, but in the third case there is freedom and participation. When these scenarios are translated for children, caregivers often argue that restrictions imposed, especially with respect to girls, are for their protection.

### **In Partnership with Children:**

Children's right to participation is a new concept to both adults and children. This is a difficult concept to understand and even more difficult to practice, as both adults and children are not normally used to this. The existing relationship we (adults) have with children normally does not allow for their active and equal participation.

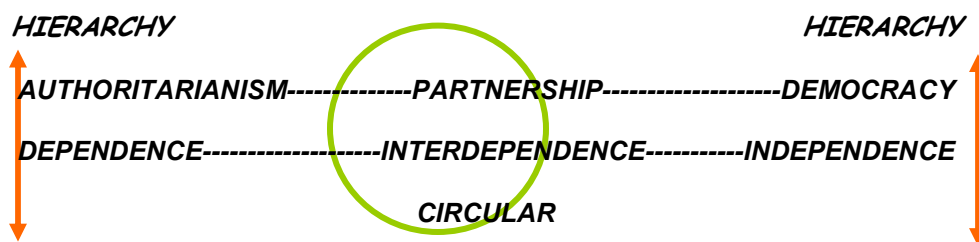
At present, adults are in total control. We reserve the right to advocate, intervene and decide on behalf of children. We also have socialised children to 'listen to' adults. This absolute control also gives us the possibility to abuse children. Children should have the right and the ability to resist this. It is only then that adults will be accountable for their actions.

So first of all we need to examine the nature of the relationship that we now have with children.



If we recognise children's right to participation the nature of our relationship with children will have to dramatically change. It will have to change in many ways. First it will have to change from one of either independence or dependence to one of interdependence. Secondly it will have to be a participatory relationship that is bottom up and not hierarchical or top down.

We also need to ensure that we do not perpetuate existing hegemonic structures and practices. This relationship will have to be based on democratic principles and processes.



**We should ensure that we do not perpetuate hegemonic (socio-economic or political) structures.**

This new partnership built on a foundation of participation will have to be based on democratic principles. Some of the elements that determine the true nature of this partnership are given below:

#### **SOME ELEMENTS OF PARTNERSHIP**

- OPENESS
- RESPECT AND TRUST ON THE PART OF BOTH
- FREEDOM TO EXPRESS ONESELF
- SENSITIVITY
- AFFECTION
- COMMITMENT
- UNDERSTANDING
- MUTUAL SUPPORT
- EMPOWERING
- BASED ON FRIENDSHIP
- BASED ON NEGOTIATION
- FLEXIBLE
- ONE OF SHARING
- MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY
- SHARING BOTH RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
- JOYFUL
- AGREEING TO DISAGREE SOMETIMES
- CHALLENGING
- ACCEPTING OF EACH OTHER'S REALITY
- SHARED VISION
- BASED ON LISTENING TO EACH OTHER
- NOT MANIPULATIVE



*I am Parvathi. I am 17 years old. I live in Uppunda Panchayat. When I was five years old, my father passed away. My mother was the primary wage earner. I studied up to seventh standard. The situation in my family stopped me from studying further. After that I began to fetch fuel, work in the fields, cook at home and take care of children.*

*I joined Bhima Sangha in 1990. I began by getting information about the Sangha and attending the Extension Schools. I then got involved strengthening Bhima Sangha in Uppunda and in expanding Bhima Sangha to other places as well.*

*We have been able to collect information about our village because of the surveys that we conducted. We have learnt a lot about our own village, for example, who are below the poverty line, who need assistance etc. We are able to use that information to discuss with our Village Panchayats and have solved some of our problems. For example, we have got footbridges built and Anganwadis started where they were needed.*

*We were able to make a major impact on the issuing of the Below the Poverty Line Cards (BPL) in our Panchayats. In our Panchayats we learnt that many people who deserved the BPL cards had not been issued them. We discussed this within Bhima Sangha and decided to take up the issue. We had constantly been in touch with the Assistant Commissioner(AC) in the past and we repeatedly discussed this with him. He promised us that he would invite us to the meeting at which this matter would be discussed.*

*As promised, he called us for a meeting along with representatives from various government departments. We presented our facts there, based on our survey. The AC informed the Panchayat to conduct a special Grama Sabha to take in fresh applications for the BPL. He requested us to inform those families of the date of the Grama Sabhas to ensure that they would be present at that Grama Sabha.*

*The Panchayat members consulted us. They requested us to make a list of people who are Below the Poverty Line based on our survey. They asked us to verify the names they had on their list because they recognised that we have authentic information.*

*In the special Grama Sabha, many of the people we had identified filed their applications. During the Child Labour Day celebrations we had invited the Panchayat Secretary to talk to our members about the Panchayat System. At the time we once again raised the matter. He told us that we could visit his office and check the lists. Some of us went to do that. When they saw the list, they found out that many names we had suggested had been added but some names were still missing. Now those families have been asked to submit their applications again.*

*Now I am the vice-president of Bhima Sangha.*

*“With the help of the Sangha, many children are now trying to participate, develop skills and stand on their own feet. Through my participation in Bhima Sangha, many children who are members of the organisations are actively participating in various fields, programmes and discussions. As a result of the work of the organisations are actively participating in various fields, programmes and discussions. As a result of the work of the organisations, the situation of working children has improved in my area. Earlier, working children were never paid the right wages for their labour. Now they demand this as a right and have actually obtained better working conditions and better wage as a result. I also believe that because of our fight against child marriages, the situation of girls like me in our village has improved.*

*Most often barriers to children's participation come from families, from neighbours and other members of the community, especially if they lack awareness about our participation. If the child is a girl there are greater restrictions on her movements and she is not allowed to participate. Boys face other kinds of restrictions such as pressures from work. For instance, if a boy is working on a farm or in a hotel, he does not have any time to participate. Boys face a lot of pressure and their families put a lot of responsibility on them. Because of this, they lack time to seek out information, to learn and to participate.*

*Adults who are aware of the importance of children's participation should educate children and other adults. They should encourage children to learn and should create opportunities for them to participate. They should also help children to distinguish between good and bad participation.”*

*(Excerpts from Knowing rights from wrong in India, by Uchengamma, President of Bhima Sangha, published in CRIN Newsletter, October 2002)*

*It was good to be able to show our elders and families the photographs of the International Meeting of Working Children. Now they know that so many children, including girls, had come from so many different countries to the meeting. Earlier, the neighbors would make sarcastic remarks that it was only the girls from our village that attended it.*

*Girls from Dhoonpal village, after they displayed the photographs of the International Meeting of Working Children in their villages, 1996*

**The 'Katte Panchayat' bans Alcohol and tobacco in N. Seernahalli**

*N. Seernahalli is a small village in the Mathihalli Panchayat located in Bellary district, Karnataka. It is a rural, backward village, very feudal and patriarchal.*

*The Gram Panchayat in this cluster of villages had not been functioning for some time due to political infighting. The Panchayat had also 'closed' their office, as it was right next to a Liquor Shop and the members were getting into drunken brawls and fighting. The Panchayat could take no decisions and the President was helpless. As a result the Task Force did not meet and the children of the Makkala Panchayat in this village were frustrated. They wanted to take up the issue of alcoholism and tobacco addiction but had no forum in which to do so. They decided to revitalise an old traditional custom of conflict resolution; the 'Katte Panchayat' or the meeting of village elders in the village square, under a tree. This is an old system of governance where a group of recognised and respected leaders of the community hear a problem and pass a resolution. The aggrieved party spreading a blanket under the said tree calls the 'Katte Panchayat' or community based decision-making process to session.*

**The Balkur Panchayat**

When we started work in this Panchayat, the Panchayat passed a resolution not to give license to any liquor shops in the village. The Task Force has successfully maintained this decision till today, though it is a potential source of revenue for the Panchayat.

*One day the children of the Makkala Panchayat and the Bhima Sangha spread the blanket under the tree. The 'Katte Panchayat' was called to session, the elders and the whole village gathered and the children raised the issue of alcoholism and the consumption of tobacco in the village. The issue was heard and discussed. Many adults, especially the women supported the children's demand. Even some of the members of the Panchayat were in support; they were fed up with the political stalemate. There was also a lot of pressure by the children who illustrated their demand with embarrassing examples.*

*The 'Katte Panchayat' had no alternative but to issue notice closing down all the shops and stores selling alcohol in the village. It went further and decided to prevent any inebriated individual into the village in that state. He/she would have to sleep it off outside the village before they could enter. They have also decided to ban the consumption of tobacco in all forms in the entire village. Shops have been issued notices not stock or sell tobacco. The Makkala Panchayat and the Bhima Sangha have succeeded and the village has been declared alcohol and tobacco free!*

*(By Nandana Reddy, 2002)*

***Bhima Sangha and Namma Sabha<sup>1</sup>***

- ✓ *The code conduct of Bhima Sangha and Namma Sabha prohibits the consumption of alcohol and tobacco in any form by any member. This is a criteria for membership*
- ✓ *Bhima Sangha & Namma Sabha members have taken a decision not to sell tobacco products or alcohol in any shops owned by them.*

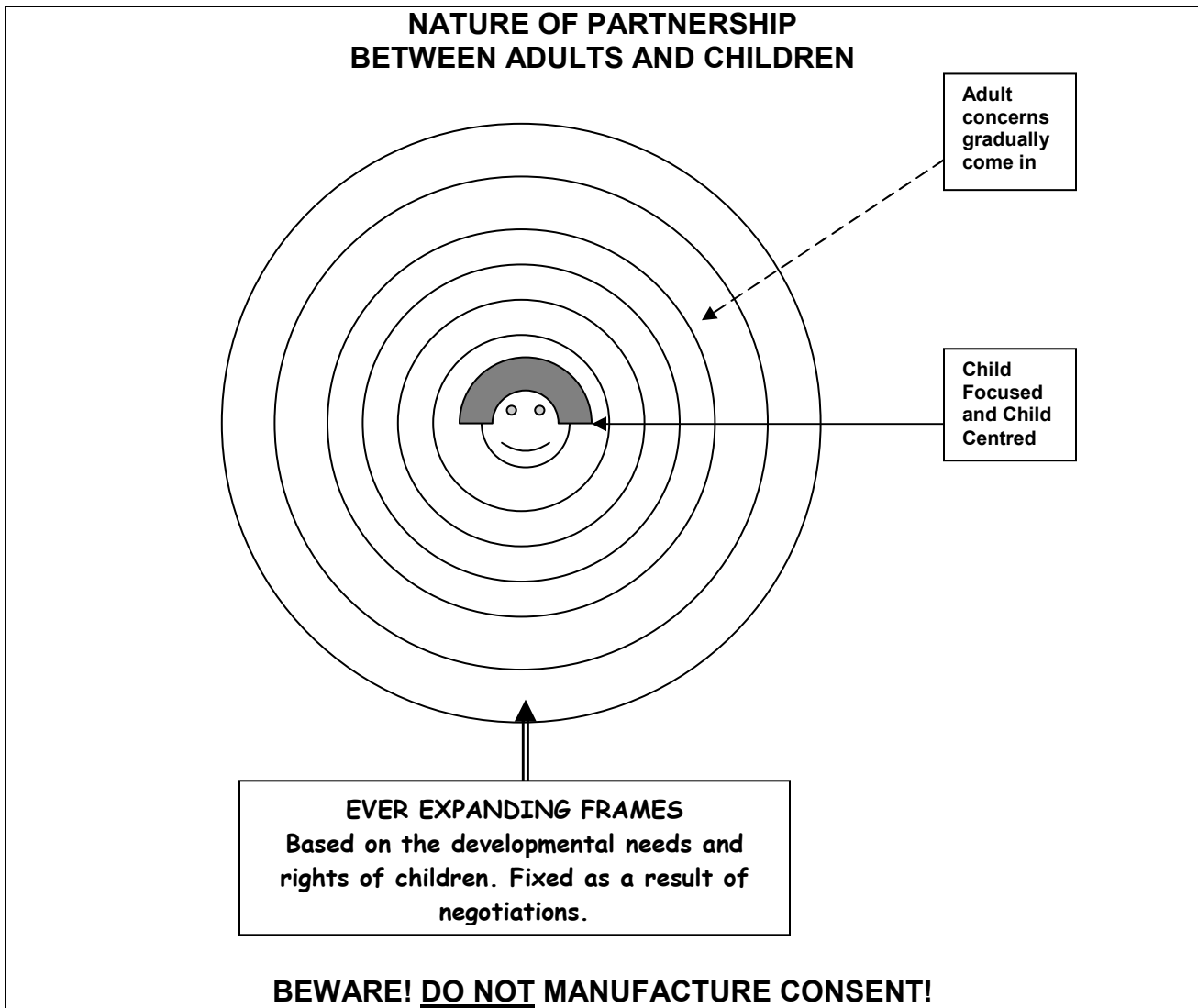
### The nature of a child centred partnership:

This partnership will have to be based on negotiations between the adult and the child. The adult may set the frame for this relationship based on two criteria, one the development needs of the child and the rights of the child. This will be based on approximations.

This frame has to be honestly negotiated with the child and mutually agreed upon. We should be careful not to manufacture consent. However, we must be prepared for the fact that as the child develops s/he **will** question, challenge and dismantle this frame. The role we have to play, as adults, is to prepare for this eventuality and gently put a larger, more challenging frame in place. Again the process of negotiation and challenging will be repeated.

In the initial stages the frames are set with the concerns of the child as primary and central. This will determine that all our actions are child focused and child centred. The negotiation therefore between the child and us is based on our perception of what is good for the child and their perception of what is good for them.

It is only gradually that our concerns can be brought into this equation. As the child grows and develops it is healthy for the child to recognise and respect our concerns and our needs as well.



We have to recognise the importance of the frame. We all need frameworks within which to function even if these frames are to be broken down and replaced. In fact that is one of the functions of the frame. A challenge to work towards and surmount. But frames are necessary as they give us a sense of safety while we need it. The total lack of a frame would lead to anarchy and loss of direction.

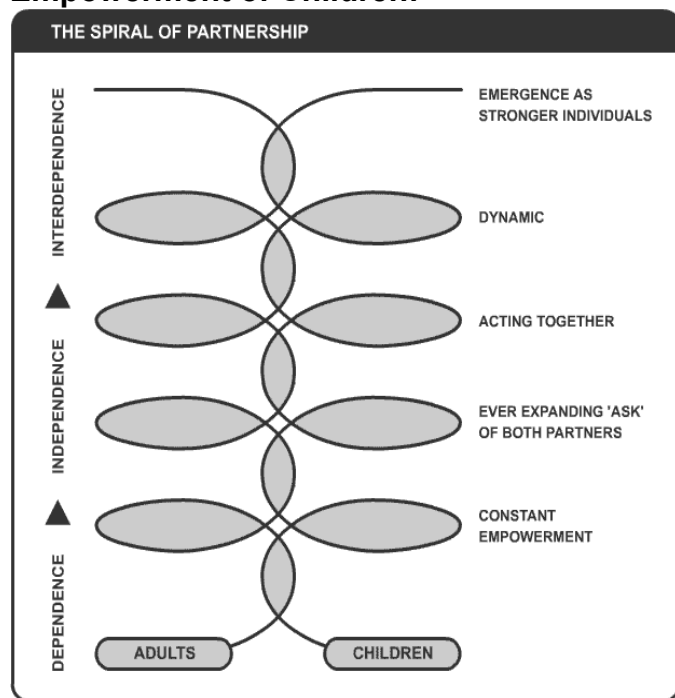
The diagram above illustrates the ever-expanding frames. This is akin to a snake that regularly sheds its skin. The new skin is always underneath, ready to protect the snake.

**The most important things to remember are:**

- An approximation based on the developmental needs of the child and the rights of the child should determine our conceptualisation of the frame.
- Negotiation must be the basis for fixing this frame.
- These frames are meant to be broken and replaced. We must be prepared for conceptualising ever enlarging frames.
- The child's concerns are primary; our concerns can only enter into the equation gradually.
- We have to be careful not to manufacture consent.

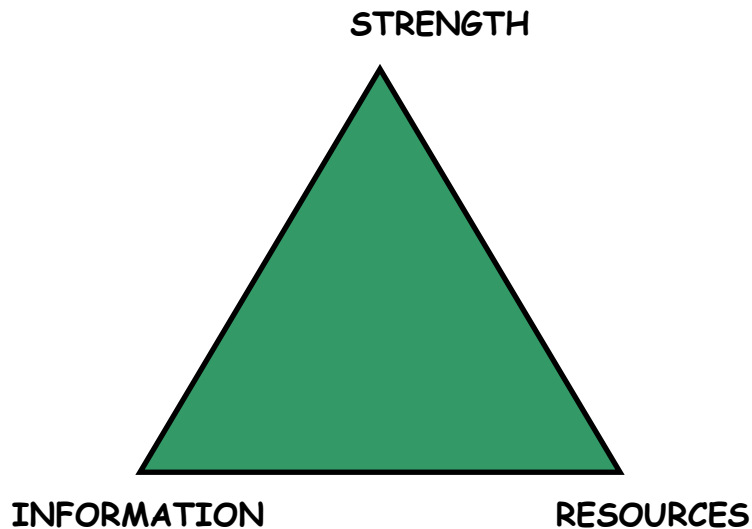
For those of us who work with children it is easy to 'feel sorry for them', 'care for them', 'even love them' but to make the leap to 'respecting them' seems difficult. The word 'respect' means so much more. It means respecting the child's situation, perceptions, attitudes, ambitions, reasoning and needs. It means listening to the child and really hearing what the child is saying even when the child's means of communication may not be only words. Though this requires a mindset or major shift in paradigm it also requires a knowledge base and a set of skills and tools that make one proficient at this.

**Empowerment of Children:**



Our role would be to enable children to occupy and use decision-making spaces effectively to change structures and programmes to those that improve the quality of their lives and that of their communities. To do this, the children need to gain strength through collective action, own and use information and be able to access and utilise human and material resources.

**Children have to be empowered by enabling them to obtain**



**STRENGTH**

**INFORMATION**

**RESOURCES**

**DEMOCRATIC ORGANISATION AND LEADERSHIP**

**OWNERSHIP OF INFORMATION, ACCESS TO ANALYSIS AND USE OF INFORMATION**

**ACCESS TO AND USE OF FINANCIAL, HUMAN AND MATERIAL RESOURCES**

We need to prepare ourselves for this new role. We need to provide children with the knowledge and skills to organise themselves, access information and resources and understand structures, be they political, socio-cultural or economic.

**Capacity building for adult facilitators:**

For adults, the most important starting point is to view children as holders of rights. This requires a paradigm shift and it challenges us to redefine our relationship with children. It is also important for us to equip ourselves with a sound body of knowledge regarding personhood of children and their developmental milestones. These form the basis on which facilitation skills may be acquired to enable children to attain their full potential as protagonists. We need to develop indicators that will give us an honest understanding of the processes we are facilitating so that we are able to create spaces where both adults and children can become empowered.

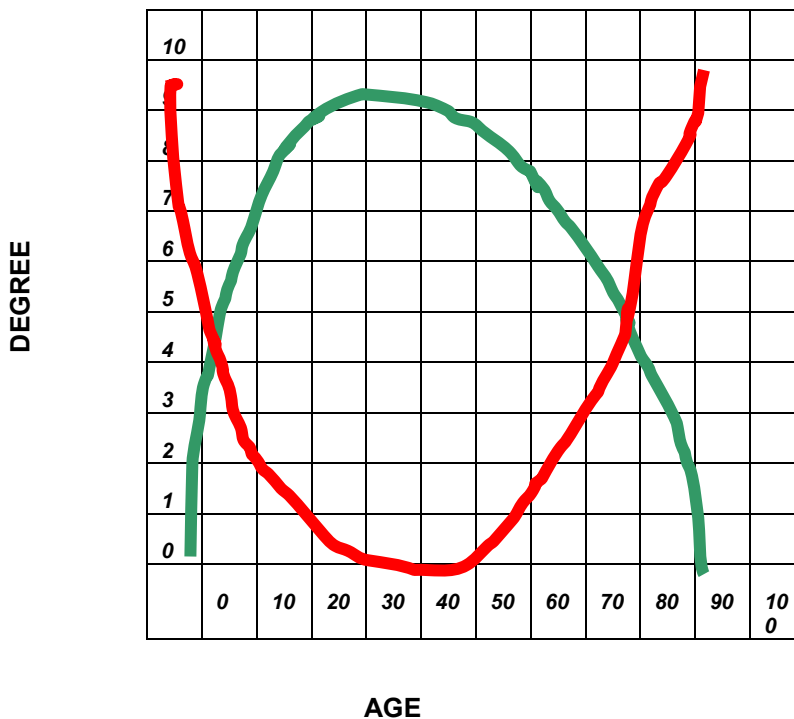
**The rights and responsibilities of children and adults:**

The determining of rights and responsibilities of children and adults within a partnership is an issue that requires inquiry and debate. Not much work has been done in this area and this gap has led to simplistic arguments about balancing children's rights with equal responsibilities.

Children’s participation does not mean the abdication of adult responsibility. When children’s participation is low or nil, adult responsibility is also low or nil. There is no accountability by adults or children. However, as children’s participation increases, adult responsibility also increases in twice that proportion. It is a partnership that adults have to enter into with children, it involves adults sharing power with children, it means listening to and understanding really what children are saying and acting on the basis of a consensus. We need to prepare ourselves for this new role and we also need to provide children with the knowledge and skills to organise themselves, to access information and resources and to understand structures, be they political, socio-cultural or economic.

It is also important for adults to protect their arenas of participation, so that we do not usurp children’s spaces or manipulate them.

**THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITY CURVE**



- ❑ *The enjoyment of rights probably decreases from birth to middle age and then begins to increase again.*
- ❑ *Similarly the responsibility curve probably increases from birth to middle age and then decreases.*
- ❑ *Rights and responsibilities are never equally balanced.*

RIGHTS ■      RESPONSIBILITIES ■

The rights and responsibilities of adults and children are not always equally balanced. At no point in ones life are rights and responsibilities equal. Adding a right does not necessarily mean adding on a corresponding responsibility. A baby has all her rights, but practically no responsibilities. Similarly, senior

citizens or mentally challenged individuals. Rights and responsibilities are determined by age and ability of the individual.

The diagram below attempts to show how rights and responsibilities are in practice – the extent of realisation – and not as it is stated in theory.

### **Elements of strategy that enable children's participation:**

There are three major elements to our strategy and they are, structure, process and agency and all the three embrace and provide for diversity, flexibility, choice while ensuring close attention to issues of non-discrimination and inclusion.

These elements need to be built into the overall Strategy in a way that is integral to every step of the process. The role that the adult organisations need to play (example: CWC and the Panchayats etc:) and the need to provide spaces within formal structures for children to participate. These formal structures be they the local government, education systems, the home and the community do not lend themselves to dramatic changes and need to be understood and gradually redesigned to allow for children's participation as a mandatory part of their functioning. It is only if these spaces are provided, and that is our role and responsibility, can children meaningfully participate and also more importantly, can these spaces be upscaled and replicated at a state or national level. Children's participation does not absolve us adults of the role we need to play and does not mean that we transfer all our obligations and responsibilities to children.

The structures that are proposed should have inbuilt diversity, flexibility and choice, as the socio-cultural, geographical, economic and political situation in each area is different and structures have to be adapted to these. (For example, children in the Toofan Panchayats have designed and adapted the existing structures to suit their local specific situations).

Structures alone do not comprise the whole 'model of the Toofan Strategy' as the other two areas, that of process and agency are equally if not more important. We do not have a blue print and have always maintained this when explaining our strategy. We have all experienced the failure of 'blue prints' (especially those designed by international agencies, governments and bi-laterals). We would also like to stress that the children of Bhima Sangha are the ones who identified the elements of the Toofan Model, designed the processes and found their "own ways of organising themselves and finding structures that were most feasible in their particular situation".

In Toofan, 'process' is a running theme as is agency and is inbuilt into all aspects of the strategy. For instance, the composition of and steps to setting up of the Makkala Panchayat is determined by the children of each Panchayat based on a deep understanding of the local specific context. It is true that the concept of the Makkala Panchayat is common to all Panchayats and that is because we have a system of Panchayat Raj in India and we have found a suitable way to enable children's participation in local governance that works best for our situation. This however may not work in Bangladesh in exactly the same way, but then we do not know enough about Bangladesh to comment, but Nepal for instance could very effectively use the structure of District Level Children's Boards as a peg to hang their strategy on. It is important for us adults to find these pegs in each country's political context and devise a strategy that mainstreams children's participation.

The 'principle' here is enabling children's participation in governance; the 'model' we use is the Makkala Panchayat because it works for us; the 'process' is the setting up and use of this space by children and how children use this space (which is so very different for area to area and also from situation to situation) is their exhibition of 'agency'. One cannot exist independently from the others, you cannot have processes without linking this to structures and the outcome is agency.

### KALLIAMMA

*I am Kaliyamma. I am 23 years old. The members of Namma Sabha have selected me as a Village Level Activist. I now work in Belve Panchayat.*

*I was a member of Bhima Sangha for 6 years. I helped to strengthen and build the Bhima Sangha in Belve.*

*I studied up to 9<sup>th</sup> standard. That was the time I had my first menstrual period. My family asked me to take a month off from school because of that. The teacher detained me in the class. That is why I stopped my schooling. Next I started rolling beedis.*

*But that work gave me dizziness and backache. So I joined a cashew factory as a worker. I became a member of Bhima Sangha at that time. In 1996 I attended a very large Mela of Bhima Sangha in Bangalore where working children from different parts of the country. That was the first time I traveled such a large distance with other children. My family had not been keen that I participate, but Prabhakar who was the field activist of CWC had convinced my parents to let me travel to Bangalore.*

*When I returned from Bangalore I was determined to make the Bhima Sangha in Belve strong. We were only 5 members at that time, I could immediately make it a 20 member chapter. I also helped other children in other parts of Belve Panchayat to form their own Bhima Sanghas.*

*Next we learnt about how to conduct surveys and carried out a survey in Belve. We identified 280 working children. We also learnt that 80 children had migrated from our Village for work in just the previous year. We have since then been using information well. We use it to take up issues with our local governments.*

*We have now started 3 Extension Anganwadi's in Belve with the help of the Task Force. I would like to share with you the story of how we managed to build an Extension School in our Panchayat.*

*We used to meet once a week as Bhima Sangha. During those meetings we strongly felt that we needed to meet every day and get informed about many issues. But there was no place for us to meet. We requested the Panchayat to make a small building available to us. The Panchayat said that they did not have any land, but if we could find some land, they could give us a small grant to construct the building. We decided to use a small part of the land owned by the Forest Department, put up a thatched roof and started to meet there. Until the monsoons, we were able to use the shed. When the rains started, the roof fell. The Forest Department did not let us put up the shed again – they threatened us. At that time, Sri. Dyavappanayaka of our village offered some land for us to build our Extension School.*

*We called a meeting of the members of the Panchayat and the elders in the community. We told them that we now had land. We requested them to support us for the building. This request was placed before the Panchayat. They said that they could pay us Rs. 15,000. But the elders who prepared the estimate informed us that Rs. 15,000 was not enough to build.*

*We were determined to have our school. We convinced Sri Kullu Nayaka, a mason to work for us free of cost. The members of Bhima Sangha and our parents decided to work in the evenings (up to mid-night) as our contribution. We joined hands with Sri. Kullu Nayaka and built the foundations and the walls. When we had to build the roof, we found only one carpenter, but no assistance. Susheela, a member of Bhima Sangha, for the first time offered to climb up and assist the carpenter to build the roof. Finally, in spite of all this, we were a little short of money. We had a Rs. 500 saving. We contributed that to the building. And finally our building was ready.*

*I remember how we used to bring oil lamps from our own houses to take to the school and to work in it.*

*When I had left school, my family members and the others in the village used to think of me as good for nothing. Now because of the Bhima Sangha, I have got a lot of recognition. A few years ago people used to make negative remarks about my involvement in the work of Bhima Sangha. I then started sharing about what I was doing in Bhima Sangha in great detail in my family. I brought my father to Namma Bhoomi. I would take my father to meetings under that pretext that I was scared to go alone. He saw how I participated and how other children respected me. He gradually began to let me participate. By the time we began working on the school building he had started supporting me a lot in our work.*

*Now I have a lot of confidence. I feel that I talk to anyone. I am confident about my ability to take up responsibilities. I have been able to participate in many places and gain experiences. Now I have begun to write stories, plays and poems for children.*

*(By Kaliyamma, 2002)*



Conversly, mere process oriented initiatives have no meaning unless they impact on structures and exhibit agency.

The Bhima Sangha and the Namma Sabha (and now the Child Rights Organisation) were formed by the children or youth involved, and not by us, because they felt a need. They also demanded a children's government that was later called the Makkala Panchayat. They designed its structure, decided on their leadership style and the purpose of these organisations. We, along with the children integrated these into a strategy. The children wanted the Makkala Panchayat to have a formal status with the local government and we then devised a link mechanism to formally integrate the Makkala Panchayat with the Gram Panchayat, that is the Task Force. This link also enables all these parallel structures to be mainstreamed and the whole model to be upscaled to a State or National level.

### **Issues of replication, up scaling and mainstreaming:**

The question is not one of replication but of translating 'principles' and picking up isolated elements from an integrated strategy cannot do this. Example: the concept of the Makkala Mitra or Children's Friend (please refer to your 'Visit/Trip Report'). Who will elect the Makkala Mitra? Whom will they be accountable to? How will they link with government services and infrastructure if you do not have all the other elements in some form or the other?

Questioning the relevance of the Toofan Strategy for the region is not substantiated. In fact our experience has proved otherwise. However, it would be interesting to examine together other strategies/models that are comprehensive, up scalable and able to impact and use existing formal structures.

For instance, the strategies that Bhima Sangha have developed in the urban context (Bangalore City) are in response to the formal structures, (which are very different from the rural Panchayat Raj structures) the urban realities, their concerns and priorities. Violence, abuse, harrasment by police, shelter and such other basic necessities are high on the list of Bhima Sangha - Bangalore. Similarly, the youth organisation, Namma Sabha in Bangalore has a very different structure, concerns and membership from their rural counterpart, though both groups of youth felt the need for Namma Sabha. The concerns of rural youth are to protect and expand job opportunities, preventing migration for harmful employment in urban areas and ensure the viability of certain traditional occupations. The urban youth feel the need to aquire the skills to be able to access the existing job market and to understand the art of collective bargaining power and negotiating with their employers.

### **Conclusion:**

To participate is a natural instinct. It is also natural to protect one's space and sometimes even prevent others from sharing it.

Children are attempting to participate all the time. There are many groups of children especially working children's unions and movements that have demanded and occupied space to participate, including political space.

We the adults have a choice, to be the facilitators and partners in this struggle of our children or to continue to hinder it. If we chose to be the former, the 'learning' that we have to undergo is rigorous and complex. The territory is largely uncharted and we learn more through our mistakes than our successes. We have to develop sound theory and this can be done only by examining **in-depth** the experience and knowledge base that already exists.

This document is a small contribution to this process.