

***CHILDREN AS PARTNERS IN
CHANGE
(CHILDREN, CITIZENSHIP AND
GOVERNANCE)***

Nandana Reddy
The Concerned for Working Children

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Most interventions on behalf of children have been paternalistic, be it counseling, care, rescue and rehabilitation or prevention of abuse. We are slow in understanding that in the role that we have assumed for ourselves as the sole custodians of children we can be either their violators or protectors. This has to change if we wish children's concerns to be truly addressed.

Further we need to acknowledge that children are their own first line of defence and therefore need to organise in order resist abuse and exploitation and fulfill their rights. Children have rarely been perceived as partners and active participants in this process. To enable this we require an in-depth understanding of participation and realise that the ideological frame surrounding it defines participation. Establishing the person-hood of children is critical to this partnership. We have to enter into a democratic partnership with the children we work with and prepare ourselves for this new role. That will bring about our defacto accountability to children and ensure a relationship of relative transparency.

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. 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.

These issues will be discussed with examples drawn from experience.

Friends,

“Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.”¹

I have addressed ISPCAN and BSPCAN Congresses in the past and I have shared with you the experiences of my organisation, ***The Concerned for Working Children (CWC)***. The perceptions, struggles and achievements of the working children we work with. Over the years I have also shared with you some of our dreams. Dreams of how children would eventually participate in decisions concerning themselves, of how they would change existing structures into more democratic ones. Of how they would occupy political space and participate in governance thereby changing the nature of the society we live in from a paternalistic one to a one of partnership².

¹The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint Exupery

² The Chalice and the Blade – Riane Eisler, HarperSan Francisco 1988.

Today, I am here to share with you examples of how some of these dreams have come true. I would like to take you with us on part of the journey we have traveled if only for a short time, to tell you what we have done in partnership with working children and to share with you our vision for the miles ahead.

But first let us look at the larger picture. We have just entered the new millennium and we present a very poor report card.

Our world today has³;

- 11 million children who die annually from preventable causes
- 113 million children who are out of school, mostly girls
- 1 out every 10 children who live with moderate to severe disability
- Over 200 million children who are still malnourished
- 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 who are economically active and 50-60 million of them engaged in intolerable forms of labour.⁴

Added to that we have the threat of AIDS. This has resulted in young children becoming the head of households. Poverty, exclusion, shrinking social services, armed conflict and violence against women and children, environmental degradation, natural disasters, sexual abuse, trafficking and discrimination.

We have spent all of the last century in search of answers to these questions. As we enter the twenty-first Century and prepare for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children (UNGASS) we still find ourselves far from any real, viable or sustainable solutions to these very vast and complex problems. Our strategies are mainly of disaster management. Our approach remains that of 'rescue and rehabilitation' and not 'the rights' approach even though most of our countries are signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The basic causes of child work have not been successfully tackled by any global or national intervention so far. Yet we are still advocating simplistic, single dimensional solutions such as compulsory education and consumer boycotts to a multi-dimensional problem that is deeply imbedded in national structures and strongly influenced by global pressures and trends. So far we have failed to have any widespread or lasting impact on working children anywhere in the world and our interventions have in many cases harmed the children we have set out to help.

We have viewed the problem from top down. We have been dominated by the experience of the countries of the North and influenced by the models of development they have adopted. There has been very little understanding of the social, cultural, political and economic fabric of the South and thereby the reasons that force children to work.

³ State of the world's children report -UNICEF 2000.

⁴ ILO

One of the main reasons for the failure of all strategies and interventions designed to address the problems faced by children who work is that the group closest to the problem and who possess the deepest knowledge of the situation, that is the children themselves, have not been the ones setting the global child labour agenda.

As we confront the dawn of the twenty first century there is an urgent need to develop a blueprint that ensures that our children are not forced to do any work that interferes with or impedes their normal growth and development. Our strategy should ensure that all the conditions are created whereby our children can enjoy a normal, healthy childhood and that they are enabled to intimately participate in all levels of reshaping the present and defining their future.

In your country you have many historical examples of children's agency, children who have acted and changed their lives and that of their communities. I very recently belatedly discovered C. S. Lewis' books for children⁵. You must know his books well so I hope that you will not mind if I attempt to paraphrase him. In a book that he wrote for his Goddaughter, Lucy, a group of children fall through a wardrobe into the freezing land of Narnia⁶ where Christmas never comes.

The bad White Witch is turning this land into a freezing wasteland and the people of Narnia are awaiting the coming of the good king Aslan the Lion and the daughters of Eve and sons of Adam. These children battle the forces of evil and are triumphant. Then they go on to collectively rule Narnia justly and make fair rules and systems for its governance. The snow melts away, rivers and brooks start flowing and new life appears. Christmas returns.

We have turned our world into a bleak Narnia. It is obvious that the time for experimentation is over and the hour of reckoning is here. We have to fulfill our promises to our children and the only way to do this is in partnership with them.

We are all practitioners. You work with children who are traumatised, abused and neglected. I work with a sub-group, children who work. We have been working with street and working children for the past 25 years and they still remain enigmas. Each of these children is a small bundle of contradictions. They are angry yet very affectionate, rebellious but loyal to their friends and loved ones. They have a strong desire to do the right thing but break the boundaries of so-called "morality" that we have set. They want to improve their situation but not according to the middle class norms we follow.

They have rejected society and social structures for good reason. They feel that society has rejected them, that they have been pushed out of the class triangle, relegated to live on the periphery, marginalised and ignored. They have no reason to trust us because we have given them no cause to do so.

⁵ Introduced to me by Julian Kramer, Save the Children Norway.

⁶ C. S. Lewis The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Butler and Tanner Ltd Frome for Geoffrey Bles Ltd, 1950

Any attempt to make them accept our norms and values, to convert them into mini clones of us would be to do a grave injustice to them.

We are not perfect and neither is the world we have created. We, the adults of this world, are responsible for the problems our children face. They see the structures that we have put in place as the cause of their predicament. They tend to know what is wrong with it and often times know what needs to be done to change it.

Those of us who are practitioners working with children may possess all the knowledge and skills required, but devoid of the right attitude that could do children more harm than good.

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 kilometers 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.⁷

⁷ Martin Woodhead – at the Child Rights Conference, Katmandu, May 2000.

The education system in India is far from this ideal. A system evolved from an education system designed by the British to produce clerks for the Colonial Bureaucracy, it disempowers children rather than empower them. It perpetuates social stratification and is one of the causes of child labour at its best.

The idea that children should not work, that there should be State control on what children can and cannot do and under what conditions and that they should complete a formal education came from England during the early years of the last century. During the period of industrialisation in Britain so many children worked in the textile factories that it gave rise to a fear that children would gradually replace adults⁸.

The frameworks adopted to perceive the issue of child labour have not been based on what is good or bad for children. It has certainly not taken children's views into consideration or addressed the reality that children face. They are largely the application of adult definitions originated in the West and reflected in legislative and policy approaches.

Prabakar was living in a village with his family. He was going to school. One day he and his younger siblings heard his father speaking in hushed tones to his mother. His father had lost his job and could not pay back the heavy debts they had. His mother was speaking about selling her '*manglsutra*' or wedding chain, the only piece of jewellery she now owned. Prabakar could not bear this. The next day he decided to go the Bangalore City and work in a small restaurant. He sent his meager pay back home to help his family.

Then one day the Supreme Court of India⁸⁹ issued a directive in response to a PIL (public interest litigation) filed by a well-meaning citizen asking for immediate intervention on the issue of child labour in India.

The directive ordered State Governments to conduct surveys to enumerate the children who worked in violation of the law. Employers were directed to pay a sum of Rupees 20,000.00 (300 Pounds) per child illegally employed to the State Government who was supposed to provide these children an education in an 'appropriate institution'. The employer was also expected to either replace the child with an adult member of the family or pay a further Rupees 5,000.00 (72 Pounds).

Overnight Prabakar's life changed. He was dismissed from the restaurant and become a street child. He lost the meager pay he was receiving, his board and lodging at the restaurant and had to fend for himself. He did not have the heart to go home and further burden his struggling family. He became a rag picker and tried to make a living.

⁸ Stewart MacPherson, *Five Hundred Million Children*, Wheatsheaf Books Ltd., United Kingdom, 1987.

⁹ December 1996

Couched in beautiful language with pretty images for the future of our children and running over with good intentions, this Supreme Court directive succeeded in swelling the ranks of children working on the street and 'cleaning' out the formal sector of child workers. The impact on working children was disastrous.

The result of this judgment is that thousands of children have slipped through the bureaucratic cracks and have disappeared into the ranks of the informal sector where their conditions are much worse and they are more difficult to trace or monitor.

The SC judgment has meant that children, who were at least earning a living, are now finding themselves virtually on the streets, with neither school nor other activities being an available option¹⁰. An editorial in the Times of India called it a 'futile exercise'

The Judiciary though well intentioned was misinformed about the true nature of the child labour issue. Removing children from work with out creating better and improved alternatives was like closing doors for children and not opening new ones. Both the well-intentioned litigant and the Supreme Court were far removed from the reality of Prabakar's life. The solutions they posed did more harm than good to the children they were supposed to help. The inherent paternalistic nature of these institutions does not allow them to consult the effected group, in this case the children themselves.

In Bangladesh 36,000 girls were thrown out of the export garment sector because of a bill that was tabled in the US Senate by Senator Bill Harken banning the import of products by children. In Meknes there was a similar retrenchment of girls in the garment industry because of an expose by Granada Television of Marks and Spencer. From the information gathered as a result of studies that followed it was found all these girls were working legally according to the law of their countries, that not one of these girls had gone back to school and they are all worse off than before.

We live in a paternalistic society. A society that is controlled by the minority elite that in order to protect its interests suppresses the majority. A body politic that uses structures to marginalise the weaker and less fortunate. Most of all we ignore our children, the future generation the owners of the new millennium. State structures, the judiciary and parts of civil society all collude to keep vast groups of people at the bottom of the socio/economic and political triangle.

My country was colonised for nearly a 100 years. We fought our battle for freedom only to be trapped by a new form of colonialism - the colonisation by Multinationals and the World Bank.

The developed worldviews developing countries like mine as potential markets for their products. One of the stated aims of Kellogg's is to change the breakfast habits of the Indian people, when the concern for most families is how to get one square meal a day.

¹⁰ SC ban renders children jobless. Hindu, New Delhi, May 7, 1997.

The latest round of integration, namely Structural Adjustment Policies, has only further intensified the problem. Studies have shown that the brunt of the present crisis and shocks of globalisation are being born by the families, principally of the poor. Within the families it is on the women that the pressures have increased to augment the family income. In the face of inflation and decreasing social sector budgets families are forced to put more children to work either to substitute the mother in domestic chores in the case of girls, or to add to the family earnings.

India is an agro based country which has in the past, always stressed the development of our rural economy. We believed in the protection of the weakest. At least in policy, we believed in protecting and promoting home based and cottage industries. We believed in self-sufficiency and a decentralised political process. With structural adjustment we are loosing all this. Now the slogan is 'the survival of the fittest'.

Of late the adoption of Structural Adjustment programmes in Third World countries has resulted in aggravating the condition of the poor in general, and women and children in particular. The marginalisation of the poor due to rising unemployment in the organised sector and the increasing casualisation of labour in the formal sector. The drastic cuts in government expenditure on the social sector such as services and the poverty alleviation programmes, will lead to increasing pressures on the poor and narrow down their options for survival. The families of the poor will be forced into situations of onerous oppression where the entire family including the children will have to do any kind of work in order to just survive.

This altered global setting is critical to the debate of child work. Many feel that it is not by chance that all of a sudden the spotlight is being turned on to the problem of child work. It is happening at a time when most of the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America and Eastern Europe have had to adopt policies of structural adjustment in the face of mounting economic and political crisis. This, they feel is a conscious attempt to change the nature of economic relationships in these societies. There is a continuous and consistent marginalisation by the body politic through institutional structures such as education, legislation and the sheer lack of services and social nets.

Andrew Grove, Chairman of Intel Corporation whose microchips drive the PC world is more cautious about his predictions regarding the effects of modern technology. He thinks "the workforce is making a major transformation in developed countries from manufacturing goods to (providing) information and service work. Supposing everything in the middle gets eliminated and society becomes (comprised of) high-paid information workers and low-paid service workers. You get into a situation where the living standards and costs of the former are imposed on the latter. We have childcare centres without childcare workers, schools without teachers, and police departments without policemen. Yet everyone wants to emulate Silicon Valley. As they do so, they will turn the world into more islands with the same problem."¹¹

¹¹ Visionary vs. visionary, Business Week/August 28, 2000.

India is in the grip of a major transition - an attempt to define a model of development that is suited to the needs of her people and based on the principles of an equitable and sustainable economy. The critical question is to develop a strategy to address the problems of child work that are in keeping with the path of progress India would like to follow and that are in the best interest of her children.

Presented with this scenario, the Concerned for Working Children (CWC) decided that the only way to solve the root causes of this problem were by creating 'political space' for children. Our role would be to enable children to occupy and use this space effectively to change structures and programmes to ones that improve the quality of their lives and that of their communities. To do this the children needed to gain strength through collective action, own and use information and be able to access and utilise human and material resources.

However this space is controlled by the elite amongst us adults. We had to find a way to 'convert' those in power to accept children as partners in change. We decided that it would be best to approach it from the bottom up as going down the hegemonic ladder people were closer to the reality of what children faced.

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)*¹² 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

¹² A private development agency dedicated to address the problems of working children –
Website: cwc@pobox.com

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 honored 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 traveled 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.

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. A sea change in the body politic!

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 results of this 'Panchayats' are able to not only declare themselves child labour free but also Child friendly. This programme '*Makkala Toofan*' or children's typhoon has enabled systemic changes that formalise political space for children.

Meanwhile Bhima Sangha has also grown. They have helped hundreds of working children all over the country to form unions or organisations of working children. In April this year they have all united as the Indian National Movement of Working Children.

Praveen, the outgoing president of Bhima Sangha recently gave a keynote presentation at Oxford on 'Children and Resilience' organised by the Centre for Refugee Studies. Working children of India, co-ordinated by Bhima Sangha, prepared and submitted an alternative report to the Committee on the rights of the Child. They were invited to Geneva to present their report, the first time in the history of the committee were children invited to depose before it.

Three working children were elected to do this and one of them was a little tribal boy from a remote part of Orissa State in India. He had never been outside his village, never seen a light bulb, telephone, car, computer or fax machine. He flew to Geneva and presented the problems of the children he represents in his language. He was not fazed by

the formality of the occasion, not overwhelmed by technology. He seemed to take it in his stride. What was more important to him was to get a message across.

There is a saying in Latin America: *"If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito"*.¹³ The children of Bhima Sangha and the Makkala Panchayats have proved this in no small measure. We the adults in this partnership enabled this by first of all recognising the personhood of children. We needed to establish a partnership with them on the basis of both partners rights and responsibilities. And we recognised that it was essential to enable children to have access to an education that promotes citizenship and democracy.

Development cannot be by small incremental measures of 1%. The marginalised cannot wait forever. Childhood is a short and transient period - children grow up. To make a real impact we cannot remain an interesting micro intervention, a small oasis in a sea of distress. So CWC has decided to upscale this programme to cover the whole state – a population of 35 million people.

Hopefully in a few years, what has till now been an experiment in five districts of Karnataka will be the norm in all of Karnataka. We will prove that snow can be melted in Narnia and children can be full citizens. If we can do this in a developing country, so can you. You can make the fairy tales of C. S. Lewis come true.

The children of Bhima Sangha and the Makkala Panchayat have traveled to all regions of the globe. They have been to countries in Africa, Latin America, Europe, Asia and North America as resource persons and trainers. However the most amazing thing about them is they are all eager to return home, get back to work and take the struggle forward. They are proud of who they are, they are eager to contribute to positive change of their communities and they know that they have the ability to do this. If nothing else we have at least achieved this. These children are firmly rooted in the Indian Soil, they are more closely woven into the Indian social and political fabric and they have been enabled to become powerful agents of change. They are waiting on the wings to enter centre stage when they attain majority. They have arrived.

Nothing was ever born without a struggle. The wheel of history does not foretell whether its revolving would cease. But once again there is an auspicious constellation of conditions. We stand before the choice of hitting out on a new path or plodding along the old.

We can no longer peer down at children through our microscopes treating them as mere subjects of our interventions. We need to recognise that children, just like us, want to be the masters of their destiny and wish to shape the world they will inherit from us.

We need to shift our paradigm and view the world through the eyes of our children. They have shown us the way as they have the key to a new age and the Vision of a New World. They have taken our hands and led us through the door of the new millennium with a

¹³ NATS, Latin America

surge of hope and commitment to change. We are grateful that they see us as partners in shaping their future.

The journey is a long and hard one and there are many more miles to go and we have plenty of room on our bullock cart for those of you who wish to join this struggle.

The ride may be bumpy; we have no four-wheel drive, no power steering and no shock absorbers. Yet it is the most exciting ride of the millennium, one that we invite you to join. We are confident that though this journey may be slow, we will get there and the final result will be viable, sustainable and in the spirit of democratic partnership.