



THE CONCERNED FOR
Working Children

Children and the New World

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January 2004

CHILDREN AND THE NEW WORLD

Never have children been so grossly denied their right to self determination and identity as in this millennium. Early in our history we have had children who have ruled us, guided us, were our role models and spiritual advisors and yet now we question their ability to even think and speak for themselves.

Of course, “children have always participated in life: in the home, in school, in work, in communities, in wars”¹. Such participation, however, is not commonly acknowledged. This is partly the consequence of the ways in which we perceive children and childhood. Since the late 19th century the conceptualisation of children as irrational, incomplete and passive has dominated western thought and has been exported globally². Accordingly, adults - including agency staff - are taken to be the experts on children’s needs, with most organisations traditionally targeting interventions at parents in the belief that benefits would trickle down to children³. Only relatively recently has it been acknowledged that children have (and can express) different concerns, needs and aspirations from those of their parents. This being the case, it cannot be assumed that approaching children through adult family members necessarily serves their best interests⁴.

In 1989, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It states “every child has a right to good food, shelter, education and play, the right to say what they think and to be listened to, and the right to protection from abuse.”⁵ However these rights are qualified by a basic principle in the CRC that states in Article 3: ***“In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration”***.

But how do we determine the child’s best interest? The answer to this question is no different as for any other group. **ASK THE CHILDREN!**

Four significant articles of the CRC provide the framework for children’s participation. They are:

Article 12 – **Right to Participation:** The child has the right to express his or her opinion freely and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child.

Article 13 – **Freedom of Expression:** The child has the right to express his or her views, obtain information, and make ideas or information known, regardless of frontiers.

Article 17 – **Right to Information:** The child has the right to appropriate information

Article 15 – **Freedom of Association:** The Child has a right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly

Through the notion of ‘participation’ has gradually become widely acknowledged as a basic operational principle of development programming since its emergence in the late 1970s, it is

¹ UNICEF, 2003

² Prout and James, 1997; Boyden, 1997

³ van Beers, 2002

⁴ Understanding & Evaluating Children's Participation- Plan International - October 2003

⁵ United Nations, “Explore Children’s Rights” (Retrieved March 30, 2003) <http://www.unicef.org/voy/meeting/rig/rig-exp2.html>

not a principle that is practiced and is observed more in its breach. It has not been translated into feasible practical every day experiences for children.

Children are seen largely as passive recipients of adult benevolence on the one hand and in others cases adult exploitation and abuse. Yet it is not considered necessary for children to be empowered to balance the scales of power that adults now hold and their rights to organise participate and act as protagonists are continually belittled and questioned. Over the centuries we have slowly but surely dismantled their identity as citizens and protagonists. And now with the institutions of capitalist globalisation such as the IMF, WTO WB, growing stronger and pervading every nook and cranny of our public and personal lives, the marginalised are spiralling downwards into even deeper depths of penury and desperation and children have been relegated to the fringes.

With globalisation changing the nature of land use and agriculture and sacrificing the rich biodiversity of our planet; the privatisation of basic services such as education, energy, water, transport and telecommunications and lessening peoples participation in the governances of common goods like forests, land, air, water, fuel, manure and forest produce; the increase in urban poverty and the displacement of the poor, children are the most vulnerable victims of this global war for ultimate resource control.

The result is an increase in child labour, child trafficking, child abuse and child pornography. While other marginalised groups at least have a voice, children are denied even this. We are yet to provide space for children and they remain invisible, marginalised, unrecognised and oppressed. This has also resulted in a gradual reduction in children's participation in the economic, social, political and spiritual arenas and the reasons for this were not always '**the best interest of the child**' but protectionism, patriarchy and the rise of corporate imperialism.

The '**raid and rescue**' operations on child workers to comply with trade sanctions; the **forcible enrolment** into schools as a part of the compulsory education intervention; the refusal by ILO to **recognise unions and movements of working children** are all illustrations of the attempts of 'the powerful' to silence the 'weak', in this case children. Consequently we are denying children their right to determine the nature and quality of interventions that are supposed to be in their best interests.

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

Interaction with children and interventions designed for children should be neither intimidating nor patronising, and should be based on the recognition of children as "individuals with rights and responsibilities of their own; playing an active role in the lives of their families, communities and societies; and having interests, views and priorities which may differ from those of the adults with whom they interact"⁶

⁶ UNICEF, 2002

“It is unrealistic to expect children suddenly to become responsible, participating adults without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved. Through frequent experiences with direct democratic participation in institutional settings...children can come gradually to construct *authentic* participatory democracies ⁷”

Children however are not passive beings. They have proved time and time again that they can be very powerful actors for social and political change. To participate is a natural instinct. 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.

Meaningful participation can assist children in developing confidence and building a sense of belonging. In a supportive environment, children hold the capacity to positively contribute and provide meaningful insight to the development of their communities. Children are also better able to identify their own needs and are capable of challenging and changing policy. Children’s participation is a process through which children influence and share control over initiatives and the decisions and resources that affects them.⁸ It is significant to note that participation reaches beyond the civic and political. It is about people engaging in all aspects their world. Children’s participation is more than allowing a child to express their opinions at a conference or on a specific development project. It is about providing a space for children to be active and interact within the family, school, community and other spheres of governance.

Participation is shaped and constrained by the social fabric.⁹ Despite apparent acceptance of children’s rights by governments around the world as demonstrated by ratification of the CRC and submission of reports to the monitoring committee of that convention, there is often a lack of national policies that facilitate the participation of children and limited government support for initiatives led by children.

“Protagonism means a redefinition of power in society, a frontal questioning of power based on the condition of adults. It does not only make possible a new way to rethink a new children’s culture in our societies, it demands demolishing and rebuilding a new adult culture.”
(1995: 60, cited in Ennew, 2000:17)

Government bodies and development agencies have a clear responsibility for supporting communities to function in a healthy manner that contributes to children's wellbeing and this must include children.

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.

⁷ Roger Hart 1992, 1997

⁸ United Nations, “Youth Participation Manual” 1997-2001 (Retrieved March 13, 2003) http://www.escap-hrd.org/youth/part_manual.htm

⁹ Johnson and Ivan-Smith, 1998

Children are the new voices in social movements and the World Social Forum has for the first time recognised this right and has included children and their movements as social and political actors.

A group of children fall through a wardrobe into the freezing land of Narnia¹⁰ 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.

C. S. Lewis

We all believe that 'Another world' is not only possible, but imperative for the survival of humanity. However, this new world cannot be visualised without children and unless we learn to relegate some of the power we now enjoy and share our political platforms with children we will be no closer to our goal. We need to let children take our hands and lead us through the looking glass to the 'Another World' for they know the way and they have the key.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Butler and Tanner Ltd Frome, 1950

Reddy & Ratna's 'Scenarios of Adult-Children Engagement'

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 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.

Taken from: Reddy, N. & K. Ratna (eds.) (2002) *A Journey in Children's Participation*, The Concerned for Working Children, Bangalore, India. www.workingchild.org