

Children Rejuvenate Governance

BY

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Despite recognising the right of children to participate in decision-making processes, it is often debated worldwide whether or not children have the potential to articulate their concerns and influence the decision-making at the level of local governance. Here is an example from India, which has proved, for several years now, that children's participation in governance is not only critical for children to realise their rights, but that it is also fundamental to protect, nurture and strengthen democracy.

Rewind to the special children's gramasabha of 2002

Small feet, eyes wide with expectation, hundreds of children poured into the schoolyard of the Higher Primary School at Keradi, a tiny-sized village in Udupi district; Most of them, not taller than four feet had walked a couple of hours to get there. Keradi had never before seen such excitement. It is a typical example of a very remote Indian village, which has been ignored for several decades by the political parties as well as administrators. The few officials who had paid a rare visit to Keradi could not forget it in a hurry. The terrain is challenging and the infrastructure is far too scanty to cater even to half the population. In those days, there was not a bus leaving Keradi after 6 pm. Out of sight and out of mind of the majority of the country was how it could be described before 2002. But that is not the only reason why the event in Keradi, in the foothills of the Western Ghats took on a special significance.

More than a thousand children had crossed boulders, thickets and jumped across creeks and streams to take part in the first ever children's, Gram Sabha in Karnataka on January 29, 2002

A 'Children's Grama Sabha' essentially means a meeting between the local government and all the children of the constituency. While such meetings are prescribed for the adults of the village in our Decentralisation Act, for 'children', in 2002, they were unheard of – because the popular understanding is that children are 'citizens of tomorrow' not of today.

Children, at their Grama Sabha, made detailed presentations regarding the issues and problems they identified issues related to education, basic facilities, personal problems, gender discrimination, disability and child labour. Their audience included Vinay Kumar Sorake, Member of the Indian National Parliament as well as members of the different tiers of the local governments.

Responding to the creative and powerful presentations made by children, Mr. Sorake said, "This kind formal interaction between children and their governments 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 Panchayats¹ 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".

The catalysts

Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayat, both powerful advocates of rights of children had led the entire process. Bhima Sangha is a union of, by and for children. Makkala Panchayat is a parallel Panchayat of children, elected by all children in the Panchayat. It consists of representatives of working children, school going children and children with disabilities.

They were facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children, a non-government organisation popular as CWC. Working towards enabling and enhancing the participation of children in decision-making and governance on all matters that concern them, CWC is committed to the eradication of child labour and facilitation of children's empowerment. CWC wished to nurture, strengthen and infuse new life into our model of democracy. The Panchayat Raj system, now the last vestige of democracy in our country, was adopted and used this as the hook for our strategy to strengthen democracy and civil society participation (www.workingchild.org)

The CWC has been working in the rural areas of Karnataka through the Toofan Panchayats Programme, which is a comprehensive programme of community development aimed at creating an environment where children are not involved in any form of work that is detrimental to their development, and where all children's rights are recognised and realised. The programme works for the empowerment of all the actors in the community, through their partnership and participation. Under this programme, the organisation has facilitated the formation of Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayats in all the Toofan Panchayats. These groups have been playing proactive roles as change agents in the community. Members of Makkala Panchayats and Bhima Sangha have conducted research studies, made interventions on the basis of the information they collect, lobbied with the officials at various levels for developments in their communities, collectively fought for their rights as children. They have made themselves heard in the state, national and international policy discussions and have advocated for consulting children in matters that concern them.

¹ The Gram 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.

Children's Councils – the Makkala Panchayats in India

In 1995 Bhima Sangha² and The Concerned for Working Children (CWC) ³, in collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development and Decentralisation, initiated the formation of Makkala Panchayats (children's councils) in five Gram Panchayats⁴ in Karnataka. The Makkala Panchayats were created as parallel government bodies to the Gram Panchayats.

Bhima Sangha had a long history of negotiating with representatives of governments in order to improve the quality of their lives. The reasoning behind the establishment of the Makkala Panchayats was that despite interaction with local administrative and government bodies, Bhima Sangha felt that sustained results were lacking and that a permanent structure enabling close interaction between children and decision-making bodies was required. This was required to inform and influence local governance in a sustained manner to ensure that children has space and opportunities to take part in decision making processes within their Panchayats. During the process of creating the Makkala Panchayats children who were involved realised that not only organised 'working children', but all children needed a space to communicate their needs. The Makkala Panchayats were thus set up not only for working children but also for school children and children with disabilities as well.

The Makkala Panchayats, the first of its kind in India, showed the potential of children to articulate the problems in the village, substantiate their demands with data and to elicit responses that were rooted in a children's rights framework. They also show that children can think laterally and responsibly if efforts are directed towards recognising and building their capacities, giving them opportunities to participate in the decision-making process. More importantly, they are a step towards recognising the child's right to participate, voice concerns and ensure that the political decisions are made in partnership with them.

Throughout the development of the Makkala Panchayats great effort was put into creating an appropriate protocol to define the mandate and structure of the Makkala Panchayats in order to determine the criteria for both the candidature and electorate.

² A union of, by and for 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

³ The Concerned for Working Children (CWC) is a secular and democratic development agency committed to the empowerment of children, especially working and other marginalised children and their communities through their participation in decision making and governance on all matters that concern them. CWC has been actively involved in this cause since 1980. Presently CWC has field programmes in 5 districts of Karnataka, India.

⁴ The Gram 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.

In order to link the Makkala Panchayats to the Gram Panchayats, a tripartite Task Force was set up consisting of Makkala Panchayat representatives; government officials and elected representatives and community based organisations. The Task Force also exists at sub-district, or Taluk⁵, level to ensure that issues raised in the Makkala Panchayats are presented at higher levels. The regular involvement of high profile government officials increases the level of bureaucratic commitment. The close interaction between children and local government bodies creates a new form of political legitimacy for children on issues regarding their own welfare.

Each Makkala Panchayat selects a Makkala Mitra or Children's Friend, an adult whom they feel they can trust and whom they can depend on for support within the Task Force and in the community. The Makkala Mitra's role is to take immediate action in cases where children request help individually or collectively. Children have with the help of the Makkala Mitra been able to address and solve problems independently of the Task Force.

Makkala Panchayat's impact on children, on issues, on adults and on governance

The Makkala Panchayats in Karnataka have given the local governments a new lease of life with their active involvement in not only identifying the problems they face, but also proposing solutions. They have made detailed presentations regarding the issues and problems they identified related to education, basic facilities, personal problems, gender discrimination, disability and child labour.

The issues collected from each ward are compiled after detailed discussions. When they list their problems, children make it amply clear that they have explored the matter thoroughly. They are able to not just raise a problem but also propose solutions that are most appropriate to them. For instance, one of the problems that came up at a meeting was the lack of footbridges that severely hampered the mobility of children as well as adults. When children discussed this further they realised that if they wished to suggest specific solutions, they had to collect more details such as where exactly the footbridges were required, of what length, how many people would benefit from that, etc. Adult facilitators helped them in this process by asking critical questions and pointing out the significance of some of their observations.

For instance, their list in connection with children with disabilities was in-depth and showed a tremendous empathy towards children challenged by disabilities. The list included problems of children who had no one in the family with whom they could communicate or where despite being well off, the family members did not understand the special needs of the children. They pointed out that deaf children could not hear the horn of a bus and were in danger because their

⁵ Sub-district level administrative body consisting of a cluster of Panchayats

village roads were full of steep curves. They also suggested ways by which the quality of life of these children could be improved. What was most significant was that children included 'attitudinal issues in their observations as well as analysis.

Children have clearly demonstrated how they can use political space to negotiate with the local governments and influence decision-making processes.

Fourteen-year-old Sukumar, Vice President of the Keradi Children's Panchayat represents the feelings of the children when he says, '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. For the others, the adults will have to be responsible. We will make them responsible.'

Damodar Acharya, Executive Director, CWC explains how our education and societal processes give very little, if at all, scope for children's participation which is critical to the development of the children. He explains, 'The children's Gram Sabha is an interface between children and the political system, perhaps, the first of its kind. He says. "Unlike the many mock-parliament sessions which children participate in, what we have here is real and will surely lay the foundation for a very sound practice of children's participation. Processes such as these that start from the grassroots bring in long lasting transformations".

CWC has played an instrumental role in capacity building for both adults and children. This has resulted in children involved with the Makkala Panchayats becoming increasingly equipped with the means to deal with local government structures.

"Children are not only discussing and trying to solve their problems through the Makkala Panchayat, but they are also showing the adults how to run the government in harmony. This process is now underway in only 56 Panchayats, the Government is trying to expand it to the rest of the State."

These are the words of **C.M. Udaasi**, Minister, Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Government of Karnataka while releasing the book '[Makkala Panchayat Protocol](#)' at a consultation entitled '**Mainstreaming Informed Participation of Children in Governance**' organised by CWC. The Makkala Panchayat in Karnataka is an elected body of children, the first structure of its kind, which came into existence in 1995. Over the years, the members of Makkala Panchayats have developed their own protocol. This protocol has been drafted by the members of the Makkala Panchayat, all of who are children between the ages of 6 – 18. The Protocol defines consists of rules related to elections, procedures for holding their meetings at both the ward-level and the village-level as well as procedures for conducting Makkala Panchayat Grama Sabhas.

L.C. Jain, former ambassador to South Africa and former member of Planning Commission released another book at the same event entitled '[Taking a Right Turn: Children Lead the way in Research](#)'. During 2002, children in Kundapur conducted an extensive research on their transport, mobility and access problems. 'Taking a Right Turn' is a research document on the basis of their experience, focusing on why children should do their own research and the methodology of children doing their own research.

The children who were involved in preparing the Makkala Panchayat Protocol and in the research concerning their transport issues made presentations about the two publications.

A very senior Mongolian Delegation headed by M.Togtokhnyam, the Chairperson of National Children's Commission of Mongolia was also present at the event. The chairperson described in vivid detail about how children's participation has been mainstreamed in the Mongolian government, with the Prime Minister taking the lead in ensuring that children's needs and concerns are heard and addressed. CWC has been working with the government of Mongolia and UNICEF to enable children's participation in governance in Mongolia

(Press release, CWC, December 11, 2006)

The five year planning process in 2004 - children leading the way

The Government of Karnataka, for several years has been trying to initiate a localised planning process – in which each local government is expected to assess its own needs and develop its plans for five years ahead – with active involvement of their constituencies. These plans by the local governments are to be the building blocks for a State Level planning process. However, many local governments do not have access to the required information, skills and support to develop such plans. In 2004, the State made several attempts to build capacities of the local governments to embark on a decentralised planning process for the forthcoming five years. In some geographical areas, the State Government requested private developmental organisations in the region to provide assistance to the local governments.

In this context, CWC was requested by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Udupi Districts, who was well aware of our work with the Children's Councils in the District to support the 56 Panchayats in the District jurisdiction to develop their own plans. We were happy to accept the invitation, with one caveat – that was the demand for high level participation of children in the planning process. The Panchayats did not hesitate to admit that they lacked the expertise to involve children in such a process, but extended their total support to our proposal.

The output was amazing. The children's plans were comprehensive and substantiated with statistics and data. Groups and issues, such as the problems of the disabled, environmental concerns and issues related to mobility and transport, were covered for the first time in a five year plan. They also recorded the history of the village, degradation of resources, made maps of their Panchayats that were accurate and informative and in many cases, proposed solutions as well. The adults, especially the members and staff of the Gram Panchayats were astounded and in many cases shame-faced as the plans that the adults had drafted were very poor in comparison. As a result, by and large, the children's plans became the official plans of the Panchayats. But more than that, it has rejuvenated the Panchayats. The officials and elected representatives seem to be sensing a purpose and relevance to their work. They see their Panchayats in a new light and they have gained a deeper understanding of the Panchayat's needs and concerns. The gap between the local government and the people has diminished.⁶

An overview of the survey of 56 Panchayats shows that education and school related issues recur in all the plans: compound walls, libraries, high school inaccessibility, school playground, drinking water, toilets, midday meals and teachers. A major difference made by school children in the planning process is that the plans used to be hijacked by powerful individuals to improve their own lives, people's participation being a mere catchword useful during elections. This time, women, children and entire Panchayats built up the children-led plan through regular ward meetings and data collection. For the first time, the Panchayat felt as if it owned the plan. To recall local, planning effort by gram Panchayats is mandated, since 1992, by Article 243G of the 73rd Amendment "to prepare village area plan for economic development and social justice".

L.C. Jain, Former member of Planning Commission, and Former Ambassador of India to South Africa

In retrospect, it was found that the involvement of children, their enthusiasm, their unerring sense of justice and their compassionate response to people's problems is what drew adults into this process. If children had not been the prime movers, adults would not have been involved in such large numbers and like in the past the task of drawing up the plans would have remained with the Secretary of the Gram Panchayat with some inputs from some of the elected members. Adults are cynical and wary of any possible change because of their conditioning to the 'real world', whereas children still have hope and the belief that they can change the world. Their efforts, when they bear fruit, also serves as a role model for

⁶ Nandana Reddy and Damodar Acharya, Unique Revolution, A CWC publication participation

grown ups, and adults once again begin to have hope. Children also grow up, and if they have a positive experience of participation in governance they carry that with them into adulthood. Politics is an integral aspect of our life. Good politics is essential for the progress of any country. Here children have been involved in defining 'good politics'. This is not only a role model for children but also for adults in the entire country. The Five Year Planning process in Udupi District is one such experience.⁷

The School children's organisation – an emerging force

Our experience has shown us that children who are the most marginalised and who face the most severe constraints to participate actually need facilitation to participate most urgently. On the basis of this rationale, CWC always begins its interventions in any field area with the working children. However, in recent years, several of the areas we work in have become either totally child labour free, or have very few children working. Most of the children we work with, especially in the rural areas, are attending either the Government schools or the Extension Schools.

Ever since the formation of Makkala Panchayats, school going children have been sending their elected representatives to take part in the Makkala Panchayats, yet, they did not have strong base organisations.

Base organisations are the foundations on which meaningful and sustained children's participation hinges on. It is organised participation of children and youth that gives them strength, access to appropriate information, confidence, recognition, combined wisdom and ownership over the process. It gives them the mandate to 'represent' their group and to articulate their collective opinions and aspirations. Hence CWC took a decision in 2003 to begin facilitating school going children to form and manage their own organisations. By 2005, over 140 school children's organisations had formed in the Kundapur region alone.

Training programmes for representatives of these 140 school children's organisations were conducted to enable them to expand their membership and to function with increased efficiency. Detailed process documentation is being carried out to record their evolution and to trace their trajectory. Representatives of these school children's organisations were part of a three country study – that studied 'children and mobility issues' and the document, 'Taking a right turn: Children lead the way in Research' which documents the entire process with a delightfully observant eye – has been extremely well received by both academicians and practitioners. It also deals with the issue of the right of children

⁷ Nandana Reddy and Damodar Acharya, Unique Revolution, A CWC publication participation

as citizens to participate in an informed manner in local governance. It advocates for information management by children as generators and owners of information to the rightful users of such information to transform their lives. This publication describes the process and methodology for enabling children to become Research Protagonists and also explores some of the ethical issues involved. Articles regarding this research process have been published in international journals related to research.

Members of School children's organisations have participated in Adult's Grama Sabhas and raised several issues regarding lack of basic facilities like water, toilets, schoolrooms, alcoholism and the formation of Makkala Panchayats in their areas with facts and figures. They have also had regular interactions with the electoral candidates for higher levels of governance. These interventions have resulted in significant recognition for their organisations in the community and in the local government.

Makkala Panchayats scale up to cover the entire Taluk

In 2006, as a result of CWC's sustained work in the region and its impact, 56 Panchayats in Kundapur took a decision to assist the formation of Makkala Panchayats. This implied that the number of Makkala Panchayats would shoot up from 9 to 56!

This was a big challenge that we took head on. In addition to the Bhima Sangha, one of the new key players in the newly 'expanded' Makkala Panchayat programme were the 'School children's organisations'.

249 members of the School children's organisations designed the voter's enrolment campaign for this massive election process. More than 75,000 children registered as voters for the elections. The representatives of the Village, Taluk and District level Governments were actively involved in the registration campaign. In addition to children and CWC's activists, about 200 volunteers of National Social Service(NSS) from graduate and pre University colleges were closely involved in the Voters enrolment campaign.

The Campaign was followed by a multi-layered process where children developed the 'reservation' criteria for the candidates – and this process required highly skilled facilitation that enabled children to carry out economic, social and political analysis of their communities and to develop 'reservation' framework that placed utmost importance on 'social justice' and 'equity'. Children discussed and debated about what would constitute 'positive discrimination' and each electoral area arrived at its own unique reservation pattern, most suited to the children of their respective communities.

The elections in 56 Panchayats are presently underway.

Special Children's Grama Sabhas in the State of Karnataka

In 2006, the Government of Karnataka passed an order to the Panchayats to hold yearly 'Special children's Grama Sabhas' in all Panchayats of the State. CWC facilitated 12 special children's gramasabhas – in all the regions of our field work, in which over 21,000 children, very effectively put forth their issues and demands to the adult Panchayat. They used this opportunity to pursue several of the issues and demands they had earlier presented to the local government as a part of the Five Year Planning process and their 'children and mobility' Study

While we see this as a positive move by the Government of Karnataka, we are concerned that it may only remain an empty gesture and an act of tokenism when it comes to fulfilling Children's Right to Participation. Hence, we have made a submission of our detailed critique to the Government for their perusal and action. The State Government has seriously considered our critique and on its request, CWC has presented a proposal State regarding setting up Makkala Panchayats in the entire state.

CWC has also submitted a petition for the inclusion of Makkala Panchayats in all the States of India to the Central Minister, Panchayat Raj and Rural Development. This petition is presently being discussed with the Minister and Secretary of the RDPR and will subsequently be circulated to all the States for their feedback.

The Adolescent sub-committee of the National Planning Commission has, based on the suggestions of CWC's Director – Development, Nandana Reddy, recommended that Makkala Panchayats and Task Forces be included in the planning process of the country. In addition, they have taken a decision that during the drafting of the next 5 year plans, the drafting committee will include plans developed by children and also draft its own recommendations based on the plans developed by children.

All these auger well for the expansion of Makkala Panchayats.

Challenges ahead

We now find ourselves at a point in time when there is heightened awareness about children's rights as a concept – yet, there are very few examples of children's participation and protagonism that embody its spirit in entirety. There are also very few structures for children's participation in mainstream arenas. While we now receive a high level of appreciation about Makkala Panchayats – from people, organisations and governments – when we discuss about going to scale, several questions poised to us 'how do we build capacities of adults to facilitate this?', 'how do we ensure that Makkala Panchayats do not become corrupt?' 'How do we ensure that adults do not manipulate children?'. These are

issues that can be effectively addressed with systematic strategising, planning, capacity building and monitoring.

As we see it, our key concerns are not these. The most important challenge for structures such as Makkala Panchayats today is the present political environment opposing decentralisation in our country. There are extremely well orchestrated and persistent moves from the higher powers to curtail the scope and strength of local governments. Instead of making attempts to build the capacities of the local governments that are closest to people – hence most accountable - often allegations are made about their inefficiency in order to justify the efforts to undermine the local governments.

As an organisation, we are coordinating a state level campaign that is countering the latest and the most blatant move by the State level elected representatives to take away crucial powers of the local governments.

As a part of our work and our campaign advocating decentralisation, we are also generating debates and discussions about the need for meaningful decentralised governance that activates civil society participation – not as extensions of the state – but as a vibrant and alert group of people capable of countering injustice, challenging the status quo and defining development. We are focussed, in all our programmes to ensure that the definition of ‘civil society’ includes children and all other groups that have been hitherto marginalised in social, economic and political spaces.

Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) guarantees children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and to exercise freedom of expression, children are frequently denied the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes and activities that effect their lives and futures. The right to participation also depends on the realisation of other primary rights such as access to information, the freedom of association and the right to formulate opinions free from influence and coercion. The principle of participation should be integrated into all areas of concern for children⁸.

We are aware that ‘citizenship’ of children remains a difficult concept and that children’s political participation is not acceptable to a large number of adults – world wide. However, children have proved, time and again that they are political beings, capable of making extremely astute observations and evolving creative solutions.

It is time that all governments realise that children have a right to be actively determining the course of their lives and not enabling them to do so to the best of their potential is a violation of their rights. The children and adults who have been

1. ⁸ A child rights agenda for the coming decade, September 5, 2000

actively part of local governments have had an education in democracy that no university can match. In them, we see a hope for 'real democracy'.

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