

THE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN OR CHILDREN'S PROTAGONISM

The 2001 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children wishes to involve children globally in the formulation of the Child Rights Agenda for the coming decade. At this event it is important to visibly demonstrate and show case the meaningful participation of children.

This paper sets out to discuss the advantages of organised participation of children as a more meaningful way for them to intervene in the development of policies, programmes and actions concerning their lives. This in no way attempts to discount the validity of the participation of individual children in areas that effect them personally.

Introduction:

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 children¹.

A democratic definition of Participation:

The word 'Participation' takes on different forms and meanings depending on the context in which it is situated. The involvement of some children in the inaugural ceremony of a conference, the listening to children's views and the participation of children in designing some elements of a programme are all considered forms of participation. However, true participation cannot be merely decorative, symbolic and superficial or a one time event.

Participation is therefore defined by the ideological frame surrounding it, and would take on different meanings in different societies; in a dictatorship participation would be practiced symbolically if at all, while in an egalitarian one it would be more active. Participation as defined within a democracy should be equal, active, sustained and informed.

“Until the lions have their historians, history will always be told by the hunters”.

A South African proverb

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

Organised versus individual participation:

In a world where social, political and economic structures are still very much hierarchical, children are the most marginalised - even more so than women. Their effective participation depends largely on the extent to which they are organised. Coming together gives them visibility, strength and a collective voice. The participation of individual children is difficult and ineffective because they represent no one but themselves; it excludes the less vocal and visible; and it gives more room for manipulation.

On the other hand the organised participation of children, especially the more disadvantaged children, gives children strength, access to more information, confidence, an identity and ownership. Individual children representing such groups voice the views and aspirations of the collective. However what needs to be ensured is that all individual children have an equal right to participate in the development of the collective voice.

To enable this children need to be encouraged to form 'base organisations' that are natural groupings of children based on their common needs and cause. It should not be imposed by adults from above based on funding or other organisational constraints.

The importance of children's participation:

<i>For children because:</i>	<i>For adults because:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ They are their own first line of defence ➤ They know their situation the best, what needs to be changed and often how to change it ➤ They have a right to determine the world they wish to live in ➤ They have a right to express their world view ➤ In a democracy (if is to function well) everyone should participate, including children ➤ Children are citizens ➤ It makes them more responsible ➤ It increases their ability to protect their needs and rights ➤ It helps them to realise their inherent potentials ➤ It empowers them ➤ It lays a strong foundation for their future ➤ Adults are in total control and thought some may be their ' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It improves our understanding ➤ It gives us a more realistic view that is child centered and in the best interests of children ➤ It enables us to develop initiatives that are appropriate and relevant ➤ The initiatives can be both sustainable and have a long term impact ➤ Unlike like most of us children are not cynical beings trapped in systemic frames that are excuses for maintaining status quo ➤ Children are most flexible agents of change and enable us to be the same ➤ Children have hope and they believe in change ➤ They are less cynical and more open minded, free from biases and constraints

<p>Protectors' they can just as easily be their violators (abusers). Children's participation brings about an inherent accountability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Children will have ownership over the initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Adults will have the opportunity to learn➤ The CRC says so➤ Children will have ownership over the initiatives
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“Because the Convention recognises children’s right to be heard and to participate in decisions affecting their lives, child labour must be approached with children, with youth, with the ones who understand in their flesh and bones what this terrible problem is all about. We must listen to children who work and contribute, for they often have the answers that elude adults.”

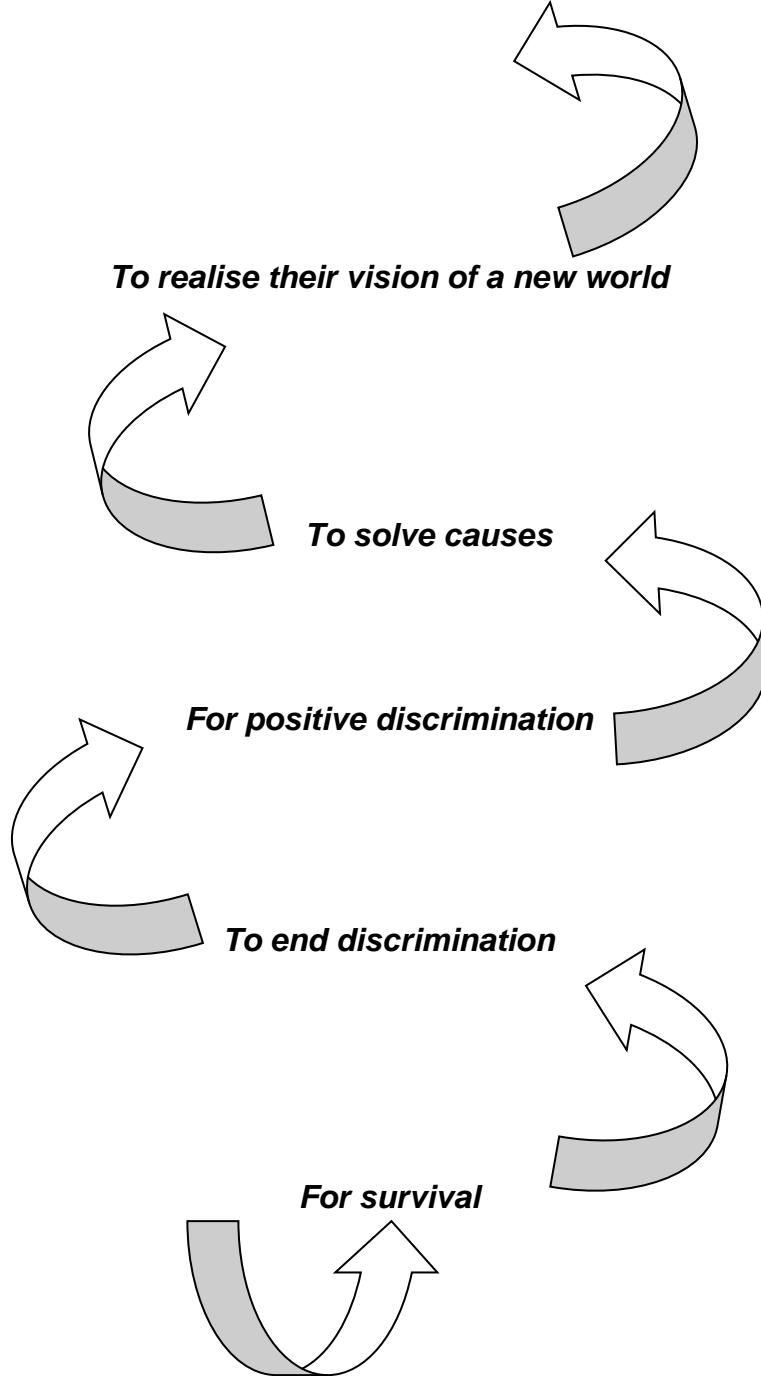
Ms. Teresa Albanez, Special Advisor of the Executive Director of the UNICEF
At the hearing on child labour

Levels of participation:

Children participate in decision-making processes for varying reasons. The following 'levels' or degrees of participation are not necessarily practiced in this order or separately. Many children's organisations that we know are operating on many of these levels at any one given time.

- **Survival:** For children who are in difficult circumstances, marginalised and oppressed their first and foremost need is that of survival. The obtaining of basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and the livelihood to enable these.
- **An end to 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:
- **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 less hours than adults and have access to quality education in their free time that is compatible to the formal system and appropriate to their needs.
- **Solving the root 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, increasing the employment opportunities for the adults in their communities. This would also include the participation of children in governance.
- **A vision of a New World:** 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.

THE SPIRAL OF PARTICIPATION²



² The Concerned for Working Children, 1994

Structures for the meaningful participation of children:

Children need appropriate forums within which to participate. These forums or platforms need to be decision making arena's that are linked to local governments, school boards, health departments, law and labour departments, parliament and international bodies such as the ILO and the UNICEF and other UN bodies. These links need to be formalized so organisations led by children can occupy and use these spaces as arenas of participation.

“Participation is not a political campaign that puts children first, as children’s liberation proposed, but a process of creating a society that is inclusive of young citizens”.

(Brian Milne – Children’s Rights and the Changing face of work in the field, 1996).

The role of adults:

At the present time political space is controlled by adults. Children can either demand and obtain this space as a matter of right, like many street children have done all over the world, or they may be 'given' this space and begin to use it to improve the quality of their lives like many working children's unions and movements have done. We (adults) therefore have the choice of either being impediments or block to children's meaningful participation or to play the role of enablers and facilitators. If we chose to be the latter adults have a major role to play in enabling this.

- **Creating the environment:** In a world where children are not taken seriously, their views are not listened to and they are not respected, we have a major role in establishing a 'child's rights friendly' environment that is conducive for children to organise and participate in keeping with the CRC. This would include creating formal structures that link children's organisations to the body politic.
- **Empowerment:** For children to participate effectively they need to know how to access to information, how to analyse it and how to use it to improve their lives and that of their communities. They need the tools and skills to do this. They also need access to and the use of resources (material, human and financial).
- **Partnership:** This will have to be done in equal and active partnership with children, constantly taking their views into account, arriving at consensus decisions and acting together. This partnership will also ensure that all actions taken are in the **best interest of children.**
- **Rights and responsibilities:** The rights and responsibilities of individuals, whether they be children, adults or the elderly, are never evenly balanced. When a child is born s/he has all her/his rights but no responsibility. Similarly,

the elderly have all their rights, but few responsibilities. As we grow into middle age our responsibilities increase while the exercising of our rights diminish; we tend to make compromises for the family, our loved ones or the community³.

Our role therefore would be to ensure that children are exercising their rights while shouldering responsibilities that are in keeping with their age and ability (children's development). We also need to constantly monitor the exercising of our own rights and responsibilities. The relationship of partnership therefore, between children and adults has to be constantly negotiated and redefined based on a series of approximations.

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

(The Little Prince, Antoine de Saint -Exupery)

Empowerment: There are three essential components for children's empowerment. They are ***strength*** through the formation of the collective, control over ***information*** and the access and use of ***resources*** (material, human and financial). Our role would be to enable children to access these in the most effective and widest possible way.

Principles for the meaningful participation of children:

- **Process:** Participation is not a project. The participation of children is a process. It should not be event driven. The process is what empowers not necessarily the event or even the out come.
- **Elected representative:** Child representatives should be elected by the members of their organisation. They should not be hand-picked by adults.
- **Informed participation - preparedness:** Children need time and appropriate information in order to be prepared to participate in any event or process. This gives them confidence and a sense of control over the situation. They also feel 'equal' to the other participants (adults) and are able to intervene on an equal footing.
- **Ownership of information:** We must recognise that the children themselves are the rightful owners of all information that they generate and have a right to all information that concerns them.
- **Role of adults:** We (adults) should restrict ourselves to the role of providers of information, methodology, skills and tools. We should be careful to **never manufacture consent.**

³ The 'Rights and Responsibility Curve', the Concerned for Working Children, 1998.

Support systems that enable participation:

- The formation of 'base organisations' by children that are natural groupings based on their common needs and cause.
- The bringing together of 'base organisations' as pan all federations (consisting of child representatives of different interest groups) at national and regional levels
- The formation of link structures which provide a forum for adult and children's organisations to work in partnership and formalise political space for children. The Task Forces⁴ created by CWC are examples of such link structures.
- Providing children with an education that promotes democracy and democratic partnership. Redesigning our present system to one that promotes Education for Democracy
- Enable a wide spread access to institutions and programmes that empower them and enable them to develop critical thinking, analysis, understanding of power centers and structures etc: This could be done through the formal education system, but it is important to explore other avenues as well. This should include access to the necessary information, knowledge and skills.

Implications:

The implications of a partnership between adult and child led organisations include some of the following;

- ✓ Defacto accountability of adults to children
- ✓ Constant monitoring of adults by children
- ✓ Empowerment of children
- ✓ Increased responsibility of adult led organisations
- ✓ Adults and children sharing power and political space
- ✓ Adults can no longer be self-appointed advocates of children
- ✓ Sustainable initiatives
- ✓ Strength in partnership
- ✓ Onus of taking decisions will be collective
- ✓ Empowerment of the marginalised among adults (women, ethnic minorities, the economically weak etc.) inspired and initiated by children's organisations.

Proposal:

A formal forum or platform should be set up to enable children's organisations to participate in all UN and international proceedings that concern them.

The criteria for representation and accreditation should be left to the existing organisations of children world wide to decide.

⁴ Task Force is a tripartite body consisting of representatives from local government, children and business.