

8

Children's participation Special issue

Starting a dialogue on children's participation

Victoria Johnson

• Introduction

I recently led a policy and research programme in ActionAid, which resulted in the publication *Listening to Smaller Voices: Children in an Environment of Change*. My experiences with this, and with working with SCF-Vietnam (Save the Children Fund) in Ho Chi Minh City on programmes for street children, led me to believe that there is a need for individuals and groups within organisations to share experiences, reflect on their work and gain from the insights of other researchers and practitioners. It is important to share both the positive and negative details about methods and techniques which have worked and not worked with children, but also to understand the different problems which people face in their work with children within a context of ethical principles, power relationships and the broad institutional context in which they are working.

It was for these reasons that we held a workshop¹ at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Sussex last September. This overview paper summarises the issues arising from that workshop, and the papers which follow in this issue of *PLA Notes* are just the start of what I hope will be a continuing process of sharing and exchange.

The composition of articles in this issue reflects the fact that most of the articles are drawn from experiences offered by workshop participants

and invitees, most of whom were from European-based institutions. There was also a broader call for papers sent out by the Sustainable Agriculture Programme of IIED in a previous issue of *PLA Notes*. Papers from Nepal, India and Vietnam were sent in response to this broader call. Thus, while this issue of *PLA Notes* does not claim to be comprehensive in its geographical or thematic coverage, many of the issues raised are also of relevance to those working with children in Africa or Latin America. The purpose of the issue is to start to share experiences and start a dialogue with a broader audience.

Workshop on participatory techniques with children

The aim of the workshop was to share experiences between people working on child-focused programming and on the use of participatory techniques for research with children. The participants were from academic institutions and some of the UK-based organisations worked with children, both in the UK and overseas (see the list at the end of this article). It was hoped that the meeting could start a process of information exchange and help to coordinate work and action in the future.

The possibility of a larger network or workshop to include participants from the North, including Eastern Europe, and from Asia, Africa and Latin America was also discussed, but this idea is still under review.

¹ The workshop was hosted by the Institute of Development Studies, in collaboration with Save the Children Fund (SCF) ActionAid and IIED.

The following topics were discussed by groups in the workshop:

- Conditions for success and ethical issues;
- Positive and negative experiences of the use of participatory techniques with children;
- Power relations and links with adult power;
- The broader institutional context: how participatory techniques with children fit in with other programme objectives and processes; and,
- Present initiatives within agencies and institutes represented at the workshop. Discussion of longer term strategies for coordinating information exchange and action (not covered in this paper, but available in the proceedings of the workshop c/o Robert Chamber's office, IDS).

• **Issues arising**

The issues arising from these group discussions are summarised in the rest of this paper. Experiences offered by the participants included work with children in the UK, USA, Africa, Asia and Latin America, and varied from young people's evaluation of their local health services; assessment of the impact on children of development agency programmes; detailed research and analysis of children's roles in education, household tasks, local and national economies; and the involvement of children/young people in national and international processes and conferences.

In writing this overview I have drawn heavily on the rapporteur reports by Tilly Sellers (University of Hull), Rachel Baker (University of Durham) and David Woolcombe (Peace Child International). I must, however, take responsibility for interpreting and summarising these reports and other ideas discussed in the workshop while, no doubt, adding any of my own interpretations.

Although techniques were discussed to some extent in the workshop, we were drawn towards

discussions of process, power and the ethics of working with children. This forced us to think carefully about different ways of working and analysing the development process, including reconsidering what constitutes a successful development intervention. The importance of support and confidence, or lack of it, in the institutional context was also discussed. Much of the experience so far in the use of participatory techniques with children leads us to realise that definitions must be clarified - who do we regard as children or young people? and what do we see as their role in participation and empowerment within the development process? (Chawla and Kj rholt; Edwards, this issue).

• **Conditions for success and ethical issues**

Informed consent

Children must be informed about the objectives, process and end-use of the research so that valid consent to participation can be obtained before any fieldwork is started (Sapkota and Sharma, this issue). The consent of parents or guardians should be sought where appropriate, or where there is a legal requirement. There are, however, occasions where children would prefer their parents not to know they are participating or to see the results of the research (see reference to confidentiality and abuse below). Researchers must make themselves aware of their own legal boundaries (Sellers and Westerby, this issue).

There must be recognition in planning research that the process of gaining consent and of overcoming suspicion takes time and cannot be rushed. The research project must aim to provide an atmosphere whereby children have opportunities to remain quiet or leave should they wish. Sometimes it is questionable as to whether children feel able to say 'no' to an adult-initiated activity.

Confidentiality

Children and researchers need to agree on confidentiality at the beginning of a project. It should be recognised that privacy may be important to the child's continued well-being (Milne; Sellers and Westerby, this issue). This

may mean working in a place where children cannot be overheard by adults who may have power over them and ensuring that the children know that their real names need not be used. If children can only be assessed through institutions or at home where adults are present, adults can be made to feel important and distracted from the fact that the main focus of attention is on the children.

PRA techniques seek maximum involvement of the children, mutual trust and an open forum for debate. Hence, during the course of discussions children may reveal personal and social problems that the researcher is unable to deal with both at the time and, due to confidentiality, in the longer term. Incidents of child abuse were mentioned as particularly difficult; appropriate training and action should be discussed by the research team prior to the research. Children must be protected should they disclose information of a personal nature implicating adults in any form of abuse and, where possible, referral information should be made available in such cases (Sellers and Westerby, this issue). As mentioned above, however, researchers should be aware of their legal boundaries.

Transparency and awareness

There must be transparency about the aims and processes of children's participation in community development issues, with parents, children and other community members. It is important that there is an awareness amongst staff and field workers that children are capable of analysing their situation and can make viable suggestions for change (Milne; Woollcombe, this issue).

Access to children

Calling children to meetings will probably only elicit partial representation, if anyone comes at all! Poor children may be reluctant to be seen at public gatherings because of their clothes, others will be at work, or may lack permission. Attention should be paid to sampling and ensuring representation of all age, caste, wealth, or gender groups, while respecting the friendship between groups of children, their wishes and rights to privacy (Milne, this issue). Researchers should think carefully about whether to implement participatory techniques

with both or single sex groups. Activities can also be facilitated by peers, who use the same language and who share a similar culture.

Accessing different groups of children can often be most successful in an informal atmosphere (Narayanasamy *et al.*; Sellers and Westerby, this issue). Field-workers should try to go to where the children are carrying out their own activities and perhaps help with tasks (eg. collecting firewood). However, participation in research should not impede their ordinary work. Cultural implications of access to children should also be examined, such as talking with girls in cultures where they are forbidden to talk in public. Ways should also be found to access children with special needs.

Piloting methods and cultural differences

When designing research methods, the various stages within a child's development need to be taken into account as well as the particular culture in which a child is living. Researchers should also be clear about who is defined as a child, as a young person or as an adult in the culture in which the research is conducted.

Researchers at the workshop established that in many cases collecting information about children's daily lives can usually be successful with any age group. Information analysis and planning, however, probably work better with older children. Therefore, it may be more useful to look at potential levels of participation rather than at child developmental stages. We must also accept that our own internal models of child development may not be accurate in different situations and that even recognised models may not be appropriate for the particular culture (Theis, this issue).

Methods need to be adaptable and specific to the children's role in the community (Milne, this issue). They should be fully piloted and adapted in the research location, not least as training for researchers, and exercised rigorously to ensure that data generated is valid and well understood. Materials used need to be appropriate to the culture and children should be comfortable about using them. Illiterate children, for instance, may not be comfortable using pens or pencils, and in some cultures

there are superstitions about drawing on the ground.

Research which is fun

Children should be given the power to stop or opt out if they are not comfortable with the content or context. The shorter concentration spans of some children should also be considered. Activities should be broken up, and should be fun, not boring (Narayanasamy; Theis, this issue). Breaks in activities, shorter activities and games can be used. Issues were found to often be best approached initially through group work. If children are not enjoying the methods, stop and adapt.

- **Children's participation: positive and negative experiences**

Positive experiences

The participants in the workshop discussed the high quality data that could be collected and analysed by children (Milne; Edwards; West; Woollcombe, this issue). It was commented that children often gave an interesting new slant to the data they provided. They showed a capacity for triangulating data in innovative and unexpected ways. Children were also able to raise sensitive issues, such as drugs, abortion, AIDS, sexuality or crime, without embarrassment or fear.

It was also suggested by one group that children often disclose more to a child interviewer than to an adult (West, this issue), and that data collected by children is often more rigorous than data collected by adults (Milne; West, this issue). Participation in an inter-generational research team seems to raise each child's self-esteem, especially if the children feel 'ownership' of the project (Sellers and Westerby; Woollcombe, this issue). Young interviewers often found the experience enjoyable and took great pride in their results. Children can show great professionalism in their presentations, and a great sense of team spirit, enthusiasm and fun (Narayanasamy *et al.*, this issue). It was suggested that in some projects children had also showed a great willingness to accept adult, professional advice as long as it was not delivered to them in a patronising way. They also sometimes chose to

ignore that advice if it went against their better judgement.

Methods that have worked well with children include mapping, flow diagrams, matrices (older groups), transect, role play, visualisation, and songs which children make up.

Negative experiences and obstacles

Some of the groups described the problem of raised expectations, where children clung to an exciting idea which may have been utterly unrealistic. They are then disillusioned when their expectations are not met. There is sometimes a lack of clearly explained boundaries between what the children are expected to do, the follow-up action and the adults' or institutional role (Baker, this issue).

There was also a problem of addressing community fears. In some cultures, adults and officials are disturbed by the sight of children and young people investigating their community (Milne, this issue). As a result, new barriers between children and adults and some sectors of the community may be created.

There was discussion of 'over-empowerment', where a dominant child takes advantage of the partnership offered and manipulates the adults and their peers to take a direction arbitrarily chosen by them (Woollcombe, this issue).

While discussing the success of various methods, one of the groups agreed that Venn diagrams often caused tears! It was also agreed that participatory techniques which may have been successful with adults are not necessarily successful with children. Techniques must be flexible and tested in the area of research.

Many of the papers in this issue give more detail of some of the methods used and discuss the positive and negative aspects (see Niewenhuys; Baker; Sapkota and Sharma; Narayanasamy *et al.*; Theis; West; Sellers and Westerby).

- **Power relations**

It was generally accepted in the workshop that the idea that development trickles down to the children just does not work. Even when gender

is recognised as important, it is often a huge step to recognise age as also important in intra-household distribution of resources and power relations.

It should be accepted that children's needs are largely invisible in development planning (Milne; Theis, this issue). Many people believe they know what children want, and even the most well meaning will need to change their attitudes to listen to children when it comes to planning change (Edwards, this issue). There is therefore a need for a reorientation of training in organisations towards age and gender.

Groups in the workshop acknowledged that a problem exists at senior levels within organisations. There was a tendency to treat children's active roles in development as relatively unimportant, except for the more visible issues relating to education, street children, sexual exploitation and labour in factories.

There are also negative attitudes expressed in agencies about whether, if children participate, you can take their views seriously (Niewenhuys; Milne, this issue). However, it was noted that if children are old enough to collect fodder and fuel, look after siblings and work for waged labour, they are certainly old enough to consult about decisions which affect their development.

Power relations affect the way researcher and child interact. The presence of other adults (eg. teacher, parent) may also affect the research environment and hence the data generated (Baker, this issue). Adults cannot equalise themselves with children but can try to empathise, and training can be important in achieving this (Theis, this issue). People associated with authority (and that may sometimes include the researcher!) are likely to be told what the children think they want to hear. It may be difficult to distinguish between such normative statements and those that are closer to children's feelings and experiences. Relationships within and between groups of children are also likely to include status and power relations. Researchers need to be aware of these and may have to devise ways to allow all members to contribute evenly (Milne, this issue).

In light of the above points, one group questioned who should facilitate the participatory techniques. It was suggested that outside researchers were more appropriate than the staff members, particularly as cases of abuse by staff are often brought to light. Discussions in the workshop suggested that the PRA experience is richer for children and researchers if they have known each other for a long time and developed a good rapport (Baker, this issue). In addition there is the question of who should present the results of the research to the institution responsible for taking action. Encouraging children's participation up to this point while avoiding tokenism is difficult. One idea was to use a video made by the children to present the results.

The workshop helped to establish that the use of participatory techniques can act as a catalyst to enable children's needs to be articulated at some level, possibly for the first time. It helps to initiate the process of change. We still, however, have to think of how to sustain the process of change and how to draw children into the planning process, bearing in mind that for child representatives involved in the adult planning process it can be threatening and non-productive. We must beware having 'token' children as part of the planning process (Milne; Niewenhuys; Woollcombe, this issue).

Practical projects should be such that children achieve ownership of the process of data collection, their information and the conclusions they draw (Niewenhuys; Theis; West, this issue). However, it should be remembered that there are some sensitive issues (eg. teachers having sex with pupils) which we cannot expect children to confront adults with.

• Institutionalising children's participation

For the outcomes of participatory research with children to be used in programming there needs to be active support throughout the institution concerned (Edwards; Niewenhuys; this issue). Channels must exist to support field-workers and mobilise action to avoid raising children's expectations unrealistically. It is disturbing to realise that within many different institutions children are seen as objects of development interventions rather than important development

actors in their own right. For example, the concept of 'children as citizens' rather than 'children as a resource' in planning and development is discussed in many of the articles in this issue (Chawla and Kjörholt, this issue). The Convention on the Rights of the Child also provides a framework for participation (Milne; Edwards; Niewenhuys, this issue).

Questions were raised about how to convince the doubters in large institutions of the validity of data generated through participatory research with children. Suggestions included collecting a portfolio of case-studies and examples of reliable and valid data gleaned through PRA with children; and showing these people directly by inviting them to workshops in local schools, youth groups. The capabilities of differently aged children in analysing and describing should be recognised and described in detail so that children are not viewed as a homogenous group. It is also important to anticipate conflicts in opinions and competing interests between children and other groups in the community (or between children themselves) so that this can be explained and built into a broader planning process (Milne; Sellers and Westerby, this issue).

Participatory methods were thought to be suitable for exploratory work to understand children's concerns, their use of space and time and inter-relationships within their community. However, one of the groups felt that to achieve full participation, adults and children should, if possible, identify and implement a project together² (Narayanasamy *et al.*, this issue).

One group at the workshop concluded that the only way programme planning would have a positive impact on the development of children, would be if it was child-focused. Also that funding agencies should discriminate in favour of child-focused development and that child-focused indicators should be used to evaluate the impact of a variety of projects. It was also

important to avoid being prescriptive in discussion of research and programming and instead to follow broad principles of children's participation in research and development (Milne; Niewenhuys; Woollcombe, this issue; Johnson *et al.*, 1995).

It was clear that the lack of an empowering, enabling infrastructure within the agencies had a debilitating effect on the field researchers trying to use participatory techniques. Worse, the agencies often try to pull the ground from under them. One participant remarked, *"If the agencies don't even listen to their own researchers, what chance is there of any of this happening? Kids learn to ignore all this: the kids who did our programme went out and found a place on their own to meet and discuss it all, away from the adults and agency people...."*.

- **Victoria Johnson**, 1 Alexandra Villas, Brighton, BN1 3RE, UK.

² For example, when collating an entire village's development priorities, consensus could be reached first in peer groups. This then allows children to have a separate output. Afterwards, each group could review their own priorities in the light of the priority needs of the other groups, and a plan could then be created based on all the groups' views.

PARTICIPANTS AT THE MEETING ON PARTICIPATORY TECHNIQUES WITH CHILDREN

- Rachel Baker – University of Durham
- Jonathan Blagborough – AntiSlavery International
- Robert Chambers – IDS
- Andrea Cornwall – SOAS/Independent
- Sara Cottingham – ActionAid
- Mike Edwards – Save the Children Fund (SCF)
- Clare Fenley – Women’s Environment Network
- Irene Guijt – IIED
- Rachel Hinton – University of Cambridge
- Victoria Johnson – IDS/Independent
- Richard Lansdown – Child-to-Child Trust
- Sophie Laws – SCF
- Kimberly Ogadhoh – IDS/Independent
- Judy Pointing – IDS
- Tilly Sellers – University of Hull
- Arti Sinha – IDS
- Hilary Standing – University of Sussex
- Leo Thomas – IDS
- Andy West - SCF
- David Woolcombe – Peace Child International

• **Children’s participation resource list**

Books

- Alderson, P. 1995. Listening to Children: Children, ethics and social research. Barnardos, Essex, UK.
- Ennew, J. 1994. Street and working children: A guide to planning. SCF Development Manual, No.4, SCF-UK, London, UK.
- Guijt, I., Funglesang, A. , Kishdha, T . 1994. It is the Young Trees That Make a Thick Forest: A report on Redd Barna’s learning experiences with participatory rural appraisal in Kyakatebe, Uganda. IIED and Redd Barna, London, UK.
- Hart, R. 1992. Children’s participation: from tokenism to citizenship. Innocenti Essays No.4, UNICEF, New York, USA.
- Jareg, E. and P. 1994. Reaching Children Through Dialogue. Macmillan, London, UK.
-

- Johnson, V., Hill, J. and Ivan-Smith, E. 1995. Listening to Smaller Voices: Children in an environment of change. ActionAid, London, UK.
- SCF-UK. 1995. Towards a Children’s Agenda: New challenges for social development. SCF-UK, London, UK.
- UN. 1989. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations, New York, USA.
- van Beers, H. 1994. In Search of the Girl: A critical review on girlhood in the South. In DRA, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Other materials

- Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN), Kathmandu, Nepal publish a newsletter and working papers.
- Concerned for Working Children, Bangalore, India publish the journal, ‘Molake’.

The ladder of participation

Hart's Ladder of Participation is frequently referred to in this issue. We have reproduced it here. Hart designed it as a typology to guide thinking about children's participation.

1. Manipulation. If children have no understanding of the issues and hence do not understand their actions, then this is manipulation. One example is that of pre-school children carrying political placards concerning the impact of social policies on children.

2. Decoration. This refers to those frequent occasions when children are given T-shirts related to some cause, and may sing or dance at an event in such dress, but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organising of the occasion. This is described as one rung up from 'manipulation' as the adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by children. They simply use children to bolster their cause in an indirect way.

3. Tokenism. Children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions. There are many more instances of tokenism than there are genuine forms of children's participation. A good example is the token use of children on conference panels.

4. Assigned but informed. This rung of the ladder marks the start of true participation. To be truly labelled as participatory it is important that:

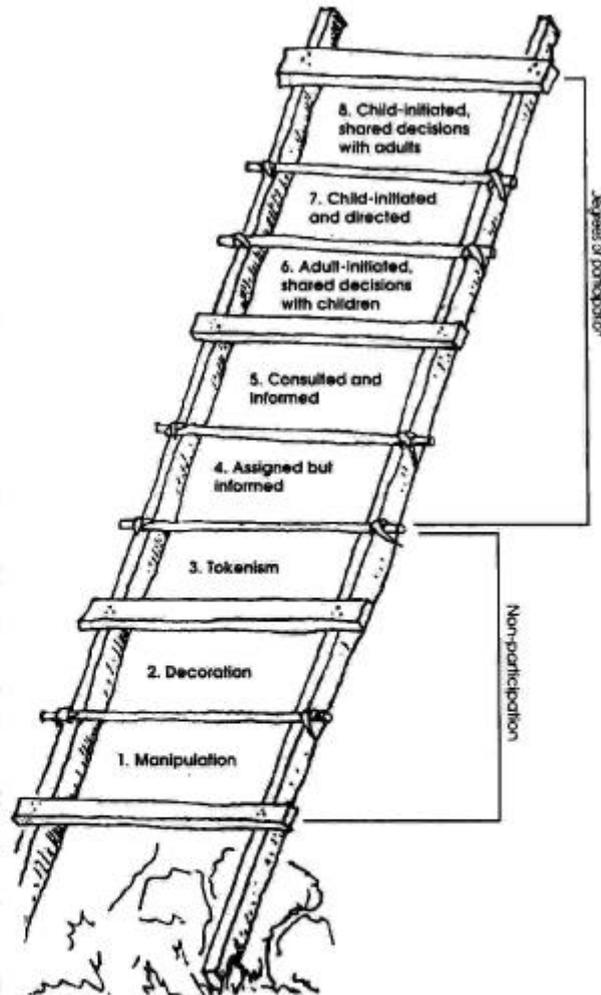
- The children understand the aims of the project;
- They know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why;
- They have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role;
- They volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them.

5. Consulted and informed. The project is designed and run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously.

6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children. Though the projects at this level are initiated by adults, the decision-making is shared with the young people.

7. Child-initiated and directed. Children in their play conceive of and carry out complex projects. When the conditions are supportive, even very young children can work cooperatively in large groups.

(Source: Hart, R. 1992. *Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship. Innocenti Essays. No. 4, UNICEF, New York, USA*).



8. Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults. Regrettably, projects like these, on the highest rung of the ladder of participation, are all too rare. This is not due to the absence of a desire to be useful on the part of teenagers. It is rather the absence of caring adults attuned to the particular interests of young people.