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Institutionalising children's participation in development

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• Introduction

The experience that *Save the Children Fund (SCF-UK)* has had with the use of participatory research and planning techniques with children and young people has shown that involving children in programme development is possible and practical, though challenging and difficult.

But why involve children in the first place? Is this simply a way of getting information from yet another special interest group to feed into planning processes controlled by outsiders, or is there something more fundamental at stake? We already know that PRA with adults can either be an empowering process, or an extractive one, depending on the degree of commitment to the principles of participatory development. The same concern applies to PRA with children. The proper use of PRA techniques with children requires a radical reversal in the way children are viewed in the whole of development policy and planning and so depends on wider changes in the way we view children's place in society.

SCF's early experience has shown these changes to be difficult and controversial - more so than similar reversals with regard to other (adult) social groups. Working for an agency with 'children' in its title is no guarantee that children's participation will be accepted as legitimate.

Against this background, this article tries to do three things: first, to outline the reasons why participation by children makes people particularly uncomfortable; second, to relate these factors to the general case for children's participation as a fundamental principle of effective development planning; and third, to explore how SCF has tried to promote children's participation in its own work and address the difficulties that have arisen along the way.

Convincing staff of the underlying rationale for children's participation has been seen as a prerequisite for encouraging the proper use of PRA with children; but PRA with children has also been a useful and less threatening way into the wider debate. What follows is an honest account of the realities of promoting a 'Children's Agenda' in a large NGO bureaucracy (SCF-UK, 1995).

• Why is there a problem with children's participation?

On the surface, the case for promoting children's participation in development planning is the same as that for any other group: no-one would accept that women, or people with disabilities, or ethnic minorities, should be excluded from participating in decisions which affect them, and a commitment to promoting participation by these groups in development planning is now widespread (in theory if not in practice). Yet children and young people are regularly denied these opportunities. Why is this? There are at least five reasons:

1. Planners use a standard model of childhood which has its roots in 19th-century Western thinking. This model treats all children as immature and irrational. People are qualified to participate in decisions only when adulthood has been reached, at a predefined age (usually 16 for some things and 18 or even 21 for others). By definition, children's views are considered

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'childish' and their opinions are not sought.

2. Children are seen as inherently non-productive. Despite the reality that they participate all the time in economic development, family life and culture (especially in non-Western societies), they are routinely excluded from official definitions and measurements of work.

3. Children are treated as by-products of other units of study such as the household, family or parent. The need to collect information which is specific to children's lives is not perceived.

4. Adults may feel that, as they have once been children, they understand the needs of children without having to ask them; children's own views are seen as unnecessary.

5. By treating children as passive and dependent, adults reinforce their monopoly of power in the world over and above that required to nurture children towards adulthood. This is a particularly sensitive area, and one in which adults who are also parents may feel particularly threatened.

These reasons help explain why children's participation is often seen as unnecessary or unhelpful, even among people who accept that adult participation is essential for development interventions to be relevant, effective and sustainable. Reversing such attitudes requires convincing those who hold them that children's participation is essential - for the development of individual children, the success of projects and programmes, and the development of communities and societies as a whole.

• **Making a general case for children's participation**

Most SCF staff are already convinced of the need to put children's needs and interests higher up the development agenda. But some are not persuaded that children's participation is itself an essential part of this process - they acknowledge children's rights to health care, education and so on, but not their right to participate in decisions about these things. This

indicates just how entrenched the standard model of childhood has become.

In terms of children as individuals, there is plenty of evidence that excluding children from participating in decisions deprives them of crucial opportunities for personal growth and socialisation. And at the project level, a failure to listen to children can be shown to harm their interests too, as in the examples cited below. Damage to *individual* children which could be avoided is a straightforward moral outrage, but it can also be argued that *society* is damaged by a failure to allow children a voice in policy decisions. This is because:

• Children are the future: childhood is a once-and-for-all biological window of opportunity for investment in human beings; miss it, and the losses incurred can never be made good.

• Children are not a minority in most countries of the world; decisions which exclude and damage children exclude and damage a huge proportion of society.

• Children have specific needs and interests which often differ from those of adults; just as when adults' views are excluded, policies which fail to do this will be ineffective or will result in unintended outcomes.

Added to these pragmatic arguments is an argument of principle: Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is explicit about children's right under international law to participate in decisions which affect them.

• **From principle to practice**

Although many people inside and outside SCF are convinced of the soundness of these arguments, many others are not. A major challenge of the last few years has been to find ways of persuading the 'doubters' that participation is a fundamental part of a more effective approach to children's development and development for children. A number of 'strategies' have been adopted to do this, much of them in an *ad hoc* manner, with much learning-by-doing and often confined to (and

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led by) particular field offices or individuals within programmes in the field.

Recognising the special difficulties involved in participation by children

Failing to recognise and deal with the particular problems posed for participatory approaches by age, gender and culture can lead to children's participation being trivialised - *'how can you expect five-year-old children to have an informed opinion about what sort of health care they need?'* Obviously, children's ability to participate in decisions increases with age and biological maturity, and is further complicated by adult attitudes towards participation by children of different genders in different cultural traditions.

There are also ethical issues such as 'informed consent' which are more difficult to handle with children than with adults because of the issues of biological maturity and parental rights. By getting these issues out into the open and recognising the complexities, sensitivities, gradations and limitations of children's participation, it may be possible to defuse some of the opposition to participation in principle. The 'ladders of children's participation' have been useful tools in this respect (Hart, 1992 and see this issue, page 37).

Another tactic has been to compare the exclusion of children (which is tacitly accepted) with the exclusion of women (which is not). The point of doing this is not to indicate that the situation of children is the same as that of women, nor to pose a false conflict between age and gender as issues of difference, but to illuminate the basic principle at stake.

Table 1 deliberately lists the differences between the two social groups as well as the similarities; and in reality age and gender (and other issues of difference such as disability and ethnicity) reinforce rather than contradict each other.

Table 1. Gender and generation (women and children) in policy-making

PARALLELS	DIFFERENCES
Invisible in policy-making	Childhood is transitional, not permanent
Not counted in statistics	The empowerment of children is circumscribed by biological immaturity and parental rights
Policies made in their 'best interests' by others	Boundary between adults and children is less clear than that between men and women.
Socially-constructed	We have all been children
Large social groups but treated as 'minorities'	Less likely that children will represent their own interests in the absence of a political movement akin to the women's movement
Seen as 'unproductive'	
Both suffer oppression	
Both suffer disproportionate costs of adjustment/austerity programmes	
Both denied participation in decision-making	
Effects of ignoring them are long-term as well as short-term	

Developing new techniques and building capacity to use them

Promoting practical ways of involving children in research, programme design and evaluation can be a less threatening way of convincing people of the importance of participation, gradually and over time. Practice rarely changes unless those involved see tangible benefits from new innovations which repay the time and effort involved. For example, SCF's credit and income-generation programme in Vietnam has been more effectively evaluated using child-specific indicators such as time-allocation patterns; a more accurate analysis of children's needs has been achieved through the use of PRA methodologies in Kratie Province, Cambodia. For field-workers, an argument based on learning from practice is often more effective than one based on general principle or policy, especially if it emanates from the head-office.

In SCF's case, the development and use of child-centred research and planning methods is being backed by a systematic programme to build capacity to use such methods effectively. Building on a pilot venture funded by Redd Barna in Ethiopia, capacity-building workshops were held in India and Bangladesh during 1995. These workshops brought together SCF staff, staff from other NGOs, and local researchers, for a series of classroom and field-based sessions on research with children. Participants try out the techniques in their own work and share the lessons learnt back in the classroom.

A manual on child-centred research is in preparation, and a full-time post has been established in London to provide support to the capacity-building process as it unfolds. SCF's UK Department has set up a 'Children's Participation Unit' in Leeds to act as a resource centre for those involved in this kind of work with children.

As with PRA with adults, not all of these exercises have been successful; but with children, the need to ensure standards of quality is even higher because children are more vulnerable to bad and unethical practice. For this reason, the capacity-building workshops also look in depth at the ethics of research with

children, how to deal with problems of confidentiality (for example, when examples of abuse by adults come to light), and the principles of early childhood development. While it is important not to constrain experiments and innovations in PRA with children, issues such as quality-control have to be at the top of the agenda for responsible practice. Training people in childhood development principles as well as PRA methods helps to reinforce the point that PRA with children is not the same as PRA with adults (though the links between stages of childhood, and levels of participation, are not well understood).

Gathering more evidence of what happens when children don't participate

At the same time, participatory techniques help to produce the essential child-specific information upon which a more general case for the merits of children's participation can be built. Without such techniques, it is not possible to demonstrate that children's participation produces positive results, or that their non-participation produces negative results, either for children themselves or for the families, communities and societies they live in. The absence of such information is one of the problems which reinforce the conventional, non-participatory model of childhood which lies at the root of the problem in the first place.

For example, child-specific indicators in some SCF-supported credit programmes have revealed that children's workloads have been increasing in families taking loans. In addition, research by the World Bank in India has shown that children did not attend a school sited outside an 'invisible boundary' which marked the limit of safe travel on foot from their homes - the boundary was only visible to children, but no-one had bothered to ask them.

Support from the centre

It is vital to encourage experimentation and learning at field level. However, in a relatively controversial area such as this, backing from senior managers in the headquarters is also essential. This legitimates experiments among field staff and increases bureaucratic backing

for the expenditures of time and resources involved. A good deal of effort has therefore gone into securing support for the 'children's agenda' at the top of the organisation (with a series of presentations and workshops for trustees, directors, and senior managers in the programmes and fund-raising departments). Most recently, 'raising the children's agenda' has been institutionalised as one of SCF's three corporate goals. Of course, such high-level support does little by itself, but when field staff are feeling nervous or unsure about their 'room for manoeuvre' it can be very important in encouraging innovation at programme level.

• **Conclusion**

It is early days yet, but SCF's experience shows that it is possible to institutionalise support for participatory approaches involving children. But these changes have been difficult - more difficult than similar shifts in practice involving adults. The reason for this is that accepted arguments for adult participation are not translated into support for participation by children and young people. And the reason for this is that too many development workers still cling to a model of childhood and society which is outdated, inaccurate, and damaging. PRA with children will help to break down these attitudes and prejudices, but much deeper changes are required.

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