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## Action research with street children: a role for street educators

Olga Nieuwenhuys

### • Introduction

The media have brought to the drawing-rooms of the television-viewing public disheartening stories of children living on the streets. Time and again this public is a witness, through the eye of the camera, of how children are exposed to indifference, violence and abuse.

Set against this wealth of images, it is astonishing that social scientists have been slow to acknowledge street children as a legitimate area of study. While everybody seems to know who the street children are, social scientists are still struggling with categories and definitions (Glauser, 1990). The reason for the dearth of research may seem clear: the urgency to support children who find themselves on the fringe of survival can ill be combined with undertaking time-consuming and costly research, the results of which are often of scant practical value. Underlying this obvious reason is, however, a deeply ingrained belief that children are the products, not the makers, of development. In the real world, in the meanwhile, evidence to the contrary is clearly accumulating.

But even then there remains a gap between the research needs and the paucity of data and conceptual tools that will not easily be filled. An obvious solution seems to be to adopt a participatory action research perspective, and the past few years have clearly demonstrated that research has much to gain from the active participation of the people for whom the results are intended in the first place.

The research unit, *Childhood and Urban Poverty*, based at the Institute for Development Research (InDRA) in the University of

Amsterdam, to which I belong, is committed to academic research while strongly believing in participation and dialogue. We see those we research not as 'objects', as academia traditionally has done, but as 'subjects'. This means eliciting their active participation at all stages of research, including the formulation of the problem, the selection and application of methods of research and the ways results are documented and made accessible.

### • Action research with children

Much of the experiences with action research has been with adults. In the case of children, the method becomes not only less self-evident but also not devoid of risks. This has however not discouraged us in trying to find out whether action research would hold when applied to situations involving street children.

The first step was evidently to identify the research needs of street children. This confronted us with our first choice: should we devise a procedure to consult with children directly or should we consult with the organisations that work for them? We did not feel that the first option would actually lead us very far. We felt that we should beware of tokenism, and saw little chance of avoiding the decidedly unattractive pitfall of finding ourselves pretending that children were doing their own research while in fact they were not (Hart, 1992 and see this issue, page 37). We also did not know of any research in which children had actually been actively involved in all stages of research (though we knew of some in which children had been instrumental in the collection of data). We were, in short, familiar enough with research to foresee serious

methodological difficulties if we embarked upon this option.

So, we started from 1992 onwards, a series of workshops and seminars to discuss the setting of goals and priorities for our research programme with experts who had been working with street children for longer periods of time. What finally emerged from the consultation was a demand for support in developing methods of action research that could be carried out with children. Though we were now back to our starting point, we were no longer on our own: we had started a dialogue, though not directly with children, at least with those we believed were in constant dialogue with them.

- **Including street educators**

Our plans became articulated when Fr. George Kollashany approached InDRA with an explicit request. During 14 years of work on the streets of Bangalore (India), he had increasingly become aware that there was a huge gap between children and the experts who work for them. The gap was, to some extent, caused by the fact that experts come from institutes that have but fragmentary knowledge of the world of poor children. Those who know them best, because they work daily with them, he felt, were street-educators. But many of them have trained 'on the job', lack professional diplomas and are therefore not taken seriously at decision-making levels even within their own organisations. This is particularly true of educators who were themselves street children in the past. They find themselves at the bottom of their organisation, mainly because they are not qualified to staff most programmes that are now being undertaken by both the government and NGOs.

Kollashany's request, in short, was to help develop 'on the job' training that would start with the experiences of street-educators, encourage them to share and reflect upon what they are doing; train them in systematising and documenting their knowledge; help them clarify their needs in terms of information and insights; and guide them while they struggled to improve their interventions so that they could gain the credit they needed to do their job.

From our point of view it struck us that training street-educators could fit very well into our more general aim of developing the methodology of action research with children. It would, most importantly, provide us with the expertise mandatory to carrying out a research project. We felt that, in the case of children, well trained and dedicated 'facilitators' were essential to obtaining relevant results. This is how the project 'Child Welfare for the Urban Poor: A training in action-research for street educators' (CWUP) was born (InDRA, 1995).

- **Designing the training**

During a two-weeks workshop held at InDRA in June 1994, with a small team of experts both from academia and the field, we set out the outlines of how street-educators could be trained as facilitators of action research.

At the onset we were confronted with questions that confirmed that the task ahead was far from easy. Though many of them apply when the 'actors' are adults, they hold even more strongly for children. How do we avoid, for instance, simplifying the complexities of children if we are unable to understand what they are? How can children have a voice, knowing that even those who work for them are much too eager, for a variety of reasons, to push them into frameworks ('prostitutes', 'drug addicts', 'abandoned', 'at risk'...) and have hardly developed methods to listen? The professionalism of field staff working with street children being proverbially inadequate, how can we hope that they will be able to encourage children's active participation or train them to do research? How do we know that an intervention benefits children if actually so few want to listen or accept their ways of participating? And, most importantly of all, can we really ever pretend that we, as adults, will not (wish to) patronize children?

## BOX 1

**PROJECTS FROM THE CHILD WELFARE FOR THE URBAN POOR PROGRAMME****Scaling up successful interventions for poor urban children in Ethiopia and India**

The projects seek to scale up successful interventions for poor urban children by building upon staff's experiences of innovative interventions, be they initiated by NGOs or local governments. Field-workers are involved in identifying the successful elements of these interventions and replicating them in new activities through action-research.

The research started by identifying organisations that have developed successful interventions in Addis Ababa, Bangalore and a number of cities in South India. The organisations, together with local universities, selected trainers and 15 street-educators, organised a refresher course, technical and research training, coordinated activities and were responsible for evaluation and reporting. The selected street-educators followed the short training sessions (of about three days each), executed an action research project and documented their experiences. The team of trainers linked to the project, resource persons from academic and training institutes and researchers, supported the process of constructing children's experiences into knowledge.

**Action Research in the Philippines**

The heightened awareness among policy makers in the Philippines that children are seriously in danger of becoming the silent victims of the way urbanisation is taking place is a clear sign that current interventions are not alleviating problems. Although a variety of research has been done to better appreciate the problem, and numerous GO and NGO programmes have been initiated to respond to them, many fundamental questions remain such as: What factors drive the children to the streets? Who are they? How are their relationships with their families? Are certain age and gender groups more at risk? What are the life conditions of street girls? What are the impacts of NGO interventions created by the failure of state welfare? Is it possible to draw generalisations and formulate long-term solutions for street children? Our research aims to address these questions.

While discussing these questions our thought was that both children and educators are sources of knowledge and do research every day of their lives. What they would need to make this research 'scientific' were tools to map, record, analyze and act upon their environment.

Looking for tools made us aware that children and street educators have already evolved their own tools to understand their world and construct knowledge. Rather than training them in using research tools that were alien to their ways of communicating, we believed we should encourage them to use those that existed already in a creative way. Researchers should, for instance, be aware of the problems involved in interviewing children. The interview technique, we thought, assumes a certain amount of consensus and is therefore in many cases likely to distort what children have to say. The word 'work' for example, refers to serious, adult work that is paid in cash. In an interview about work with an adult, a child is easily forced to deny the value of his/her own

'childish' activities because they do not fit the meaning of 'work' in the adult sense. One may expect the same effect from adult notions about family, school, games, hygiene, etc. But this is not to say that researchers cannot talk with children: they have to do it differently, seeking a situation that we termed 'speech in action'. Children may find it easier to talk about what they do because they can then attribute meanings to their activities and in this way reveal a lot more than in an interview.

Likewise, preferred activities of children such as games, story telling and drawing may be more effective in bringing out the complexities of their experience than methods and techniques used by/with adults (such as focused group discussions, questionnaires) However, action research with street children does not boil down to collecting drawings or organizing games. For the use of familiar tools to become a research method they must be used in context and in continuous dialogue with the children concerned.

Having started with the intention of doing action-research with street children, we found ourselves developing a training curriculum to help street-educators share, reflect on and improve their method of work. We believe this strategy will recognise both children and street-educators as partners in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of research. It is also hoped that by documenting the process of action research in various countries and by different NGOs and comparing and analysing the results, this strategy will result in the 'bottom-up' development of a method of doing action research that can be used, if applied carefully, to scale-up successful interventions.

### • Conclusions

I believe that the causes of success or failure of interventions for poor children are still ill-understood, and that one of the major drawbacks is the problem of 'listening to children'. We can hardly hope to develop good intervention methods if we not only cannot obtain reliable information from those for whom the intervention is intended in the first place, but also still have to convince those in the decision-making positions that children's experiences and opinions really matter.

CWUP is now well under way in India, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Kenya and Colombia. Box 1 highlights two of these projects. For us, the academic researchers involved, the opportunity to reflect in dialogue with those who work in the field is an invaluable opportunity to broaden our understanding of the world.

One of the main problems we now have is the question that was put so pointedly at the beginning of the workshop in 1994: "*Can illiterate street educators find a place at the university?*" We believe not only that they can, but that it is of utmost importance to enable them to do so. A challenging experience, as I was to find out last year when I participated in the first training organised by Kollashany. He and his team had selected from the participants, three young educators who had been on the streets when boys. One was entirely illiterate. His presence was extremely fruitful in that he constantly reminded the rest of us 'literate' that whatever we plan to do with action research has

to be more creative (and certainly less boring) than producing written reports....

- **Olga Nieuwenhuys**, Institute for Development Research Amsterdam (InDRA), University of Amsterdam, Plantage Muidergracht 12, 1018TV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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