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Children and participatory appraisals: experiences from Vietnam

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• Child, family and society

In conventional development projects children are largely 'invisible' (not seen and not heard) and are regarded just as part of the family. There is a general assumption that children will benefit automatically from project activities, since parents, in particular mothers, will ensure that benefits accruing from a project are passed on to the children. However, this 'trickle-down-in-the-family' theory has not always been substantiated in practice, and experience shows that children do not necessarily benefit from otherwise successful projects. In some cases children may be adversely affected, even where the broad objectives of a project have been achieved. An example would be a credit project which improves family income but increases children's workload, reduces school attendance rates, and undermines the health status of children.

Over the past year *Save the Children Fund (SCF)* in Vietnam has begun to involve children in participatory needs assessments and evaluations to get a better understanding of children's lives, their roles in community and family, and their wishes, desires and capabilities. A secondary objective is to explore and develop practical methods of communicating with children and involving them in information gathering and analysis, and in decision-making. Although SCF's experience with children's participation in PRA is relatively limited, it is hoped that this paper will contribute to the emerging debate on children's participation in development.

Participatory appraisals often focus on a community without giving sufficient

consideration to the external factors that impinge on the lives of the people. It is easy to overlook the relevance of laws, institutions and power structures for the lives of villagers when such issues are not mentioned by the community members during a participatory appraisal. If anything, the risk of being blind to the broader context appears to be even greater when involving children in an appraisal. Any research on children's lives needs to understand the political, cultural and historical realities that form the context in which children, their families and communities live. Children are part of communities and interact with their environment in their own ways. Child focused development agencies, such as SCF, believe that the needs, rights, responsibilities, views and interests of children and adults are not synonymous. Children's needs, capacities and roles vary with age and gender. Different cultural traditions and concepts of childhood have to be recognised, without, however, endorsing the discrimination and exploitation of children that may occur. We need to be aware of our own culturally-determined concepts of childhood, and clarify and question our assumptions about children.

• Children as actors

Most development projects treat children as passive targets or beneficiaries rather than as active participants in the development process. Children, however, are 'social actors' in their own right who make their own social, economic and cultural contributions to society. A child-centred approach builds on children's potential, capacity and capability and seeks to actively involve children in research, implementation, awareness raising and advocacy work.

• **Beyond data extraction**

Paying tribute to 'community participation' has become a ritual obligation for development workers, but the term may be used for many different situations, and we should make explicit what we mean by participation. NGO development workers, government officials and community members involved in an appraisal tend to have different objectives and different needs for information. NGO staff spend much time collecting village-level data, while the community members themselves become more interested in the process - when decisions are being made about concrete project activities and resource allocations. True participation means that community members do not just provide data but are actively involved in the analysis of the gathered information and in decision-making. When children are involved in PRA we need to ask "*why should they be involved?*" and "*what do they get out of it?*"

• **Methods for children's participation**

The rapid spread of the PRA approach among NGOs in Vietnam has led to the development and popularisation of a plethora of participatory methods and tools. SCF's experience in Vietnam has shown that it is more important for the whole process to be participatory rather than each tool being so. PRA should be seen as part of a participatory learning approach rather than a collection of participatory methods. Methods used by SCF to learn about children's lives in rural communities of Vietnam have included:

- observation of children's work and play;
- discussions and informal talks with individual children or groups of children;
- classroom-based exercises where pupils write or draw on a piece of paper about a particular aspect of their lives (for example: children's daily activities, children's most favourite or least favourite things, children's aspirations and wishes);
- children's daily and seasonal activity calendars;
- playing and singing with children (children's games, rhymes and songs are representations of their world);
- discussions and interviews with adults (parents, teachers, health workers) about children and their lives; and,
- statistics about children's health, nutrition and educational status.

The examples that follow illustrate some of these experiences.

Breaking the ice

It is essential to establish rapport with children before any exercises are initiated. Children tend to be more shy than adults, but if they are approached in an appropriate way they will rapidly lose their inhibitions. Using ice breakers such as songs, games and so on made children feel more at ease, broke the tension through laughter, and encouraged them to talk more freely with adults. One boy was asked to tear a piece of flip chart paper in half so two groups of children could draw at the same time. This also served to break down any psychological barriers that children may have against writing on a large piece of clean white paper, a barrier which extends to many adults in rural areas, since poor farmers consider paper a luxury that is not usually given to children.

Facilitators

Communicating with children is not particularly difficult, but some adults may find it harder to do than others. The general stereotype that young, female adults find it easier to approach children than do older men is easily confirmed in practice, but this does not mean that all young women are adept at establishing rapport with children. Adults who have been professionally trained to interact with children, such as kindergarten teachers, paediatricians or puppeteers can be especially useful in encouraging children's participation. It is worth testing facilitators for their skills in dealing with children before going to a community.

Using an intermediate medium

Children often did not respond when addressed directly by an adult. Using an intermediate medium, such as pen and paper, a diagram, pictures, a ball or a toy in communicating with children immediately broke down these inhibitions. The intermediate medium allowed

the children to focus their attention away from the stranger and on a neutral and non-threatening object. One 12-year old girl, for example, sat quietly in a corner of her house and did not respond to the interviewer's question. She was, however, quite happy to write her daily activity schedule on a piece of paper. When the interviewer later tried to talk to the girl again, she stood up and left the room.

Children's likes and dislikes

A member of the PRA team asked a class of fifth grade school children to take a piece of paper and to *"List all activities which you do in one day"*. She used chalk to draw on the blackboard things typically used by children in the village, such as a house, buffalo, pig, school, goose, etc, to give them some examples and to ensure that they understood the task. After all students had completed writing or drawing their daily activities, she asked them to *"Put a circle around those activities which you like best"*. Finally, the facilitator asked them to *"Put a box around those activities which you like least"*.

This exercise produced a wide range of responses from the students and highlighted some of their wishes and needs. The children were accustomed to such exercises and the use of pen and paper allowed them to explore the topic on their own, rather than having to respond to individual questions posed by a stranger. However, the school environment and the status of the outsiders contributed to a certain amount of set answers which revealed more about what the children thought the adults wanted to hear, than what their real desires were. This could be avoided and overcome by talking to different age groups of children both in and out of school.

Children's problems

During a meeting with a group of women, a large crowd of children gathered outside the meeting hall. Several children were given a piece of flip chart paper and some markers and were asked to write down their most pressing problems. This produced a list of shared priority problems, and was followed by discussions with the children.

• Next steps

SCF's experience of involving children in PRA in Vietnam has demonstrated the importance and the potential of children's participation in project appraisals and evaluations. Children have a lot to contribute to the development process and over the coming years Save the Children plans to systematically increase children's active involvement in its programme activities in Vietnam. I would appreciate hearing about similar experiences elsewhere.

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