

# Overview – identifying best practices in children’s participation

**Nadia Auriat, Per Miljeteig  
and Louise Chawla**

## Introduction

This special issue on the evaluation of children’s participation has its roots in a symposium on “Children’s Participation in Community Settings”, held in Oslo, Norway in June 2000. The symposium brought together members of the Childwatch International Research Network and the Growing Up in Cities project of the MOST Programme of UNESCO. The members reviewed experiences of children’s participation in various settings and various parts of the world and shared what is known of children’s own beliefs and attitudes to participation, effective settings where children feel they are being treated as partners, and the outcomes of participation for children themselves and for their communities. The aim was to identify best practices in designing programmes that provide young people with an authentic and effective voice in evaluating and improving the conditions of their lives. Members were asked to prepare brief issue papers on topics of special interest to them. Several of the articles that follow have been developed from these presentations. Other authors were invited to contribute reports of related work from around the world.

Childwatch International and the MOST Programme of UNESCO are both dedicated to furthering collaborative international research on the implementation of children’s rights. The Childwatch International Research Network is an alliance of child research centres which formed in response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to develop a common agenda for research aimed at improving children’s living conditions, well-being and participation. The MOST Programme of UNESCO is an international, interdisciplinary social research programme that supports policy-relevant research. Its mission includes furthering the goals of the CRC and the associated goals of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the World Summit on Social Development, and the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements with regard to children’s participation in the creation of sustainable cities and sustainable societies. Through the Growing Up in Cities project, the MOST Programme works toward these ends by developing ways for children in urban settings to express their concerns about their physical environment, to suggest changes that will improve their lives, and to

influence the establishment of more responsive urban policies and practices.

## A child rights perspective

The Convention on the Rights of the Child contains a preamble and 54 articles that address children’s rights to protection, to the provision of basic needs and to participation in their societies and decisions that affect their lives. Since its adoption by the United Nations in 1989, the CRC has been ratified by all member states of the United Nations except the United States and Somalia, making it the most widely accepted international treaty. In effect, it now carries the force of customary law worldwide.

Children’s rights to participation are spelled out in Articles 12 through 15, as summarised in Box 1. Children too, the CRC specifies, enjoy the right to *freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of association*. In addition, Article 17 states that governments shall ensure children’s access to information, especially when it is aimed at the promotion of their well-

### Box 1 Excerpts from the “participation clauses” of the CRC\*

#### Article 12

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

#### Article 13

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.

#### Article 14

States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

#### Article 15

States Parties recognise the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.

\*Only section 1 of each Article is reproduced here.

being and health – a necessary foundation for informed participation in decision making. Article 16 ensures their privacy and protection from unlawful interference or attacks. Thus, children also enjoy the right to *access to information and protection of privacy*. In sum, the CRC provides that persons below the age of 18 shall enjoy the central civil and political rights laid out by other human rights treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In Article 42, the CRC adds the important innovation that children also have the right to be *informed about the rights* established by the Convention.

A number of other articles in the CRC also have implications for participation. Article 23 recognises disabled children's rights to a full and decent life, including their "active participation in the community". Article 29 states that education shall be directed to "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society", which implies preparation for active democratic citizenship. Article 31, on the right to rest, leisure, play and recreation, states that governments "shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life".

Taken together, these articles make it clear that the provision of opportunities for children to participate in different settings of their lives, and support to do so in informed and meaningful ways, form one of the "pillars" of the implementation of the Convention. The significance and application of these rights to a range of settings, including education, the environment and child labour, have been discussed by Boyden and Ennew (1997), Chawla (2001), Driskell (2001), Hart (1992; 1997), Flekkøy and Kaufman (1997), Holden and Clough (1998), Johnson *et al.* (1998), Miljeteig (2000) and de Winter (1997).

The articles that ensure children's participation constitute probably the most radical and forward-looking part of the CRC. The inclusion of these rights was originally done in a rather mechanical fashion to indicate that children have civil and political rights in addition to economic and social rights. Now, twelve years after the CRC was adopted, we see that it has had a major impact on the way that we understand children and the way policies and programmes to assist their development are designed. In particular, it has sparked many creative initiatives to give children a voice, and to involve them in decisions at community and national levels, even at the global level. To give just a few examples, school councils have been set up; children living in especially difficult circumstances (eg child labourers or those suffering commercial sexual exploitation) have been included in the planning and implementation of projects; representatives from organizations of working children have participated with full non-governmental status in international conferences; and children are now included in research as partners and experts. The symposium on

"Children's Participation in Community Settings" was organised in the belief that it is now time to take stock of these initiatives and to consider how to evaluate projects for participation to ensure that they do in fact promote the goals of the Convention.

## Monitoring the implementation of children's rights to participation

In September 1990, when the CRC came into force, representatives of the world's nations gathered for a World Summit for Children. They adopted a Plan of Action which set measurable goals for implementing the terms of the Convention. The Plan urged governments to prepare programmes of action at the national level as well, and to "establish appropriate mechanisms for the regular and timely collection, analysis and publication of data required to monitor relevant social indicators relating to the well-being of children" (United Nations, 1990, Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children, section III.34.v). In addition, Article 44 of the CRC specifies that nations that have ratified the Convention are required to submit regular reports to an international Committee on the Rights of the Child documenting measures taken to put children's rights into effect, and to make these reports widely available to the public in their countries. Article 45 gives the Committee the power to invite other agencies or expert bodies, such as the United Nations Children's Fund, to provide advice during this review. Thus, formal procedures have been provided for documenting and reviewing the implementation of the Convention on the national and international level.

In 2002, world leaders are scheduled to meet again to review progress in meeting the goals of the Plan of Action, and to set new goals through 2010. The indicators adopted for the 1990s were quantitative, and primarily addressed children's basic health, survival and education, such as the reduction of rates of child mortality, malnutrition and disease, access to sanitation and safe drinking water, and universal access to basic education. In addition to these vital goals, however, the CRC promotes other goals for child development that are more elusive to document.

The Preamble to the Convention states that children should be brought up to "live an individual life in society" and to hold the ideals of the Charter of the United Nations, in particular "the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity". These goals of autonomy, a sense of dignity and self-worth, tolerance of different backgrounds and perspectives, equality of opportunity, self-expression, and the ability to solve problems and carry out initiatives in a peaceful and collective manner are all benefits that are repeatedly claimed to result from children's participation in evaluation and planning. (See the "participation clauses" in Box 1,

and general discussions of their implications by Flekkøy and Kaufman, 1997, Hart, 1992, Johnson *et al.*, 1998 and de Winter, 1997.) These benefits are also associated with children's creative endeavours in play and participation in the cultural life of their societies (Article 31). These goals for personal and social development are reaffirmed in Article 29, where they are listed among the ends to which education should be directed, along with the "development of respect for the natural environment". (For the relevance of children's participation to achieving the goals of responsible care for the environment, see Chawla, 2001, Driskell, 2001, Hart, 1997, and Mclvor, 1999.)

Clearly, these social and moral goals for children's development are as important a part of the CRC as the physical and mental goals that were the focus of the first World Summit for Children. But how are they to be measured and monitored? They do not lend themselves to quantification, like targets for survival or school attendance. Nor can they be administered as easily at a national level as they imply special qualities of interaction between children and adults, among children themselves, and between children and their environment, in the innumerable settings of everyday life.

These are the same goals that are intrinsic to participatory programmes which treat children with respect, foster democratic initiatives characterised by tolerance and fairness, and seek to manage human settlements and natural resources sustainably. One way to monitor the achievement of these goals, therefore, is to document whether programmes for children's participation are being put in place in the different settings of their lives. But even if this is done, do these programmes cultivate the ideals of the CRC? These qualitative questions must be answered too, for as Hart (1992) has observed, programmes for children's participation can be tokenistic and manipulative, using children for predetermined adult ends rather than engaging their own knowledge and creativity. What measures distinguish programmes that authentically treat children as partners from those that do not? These are the questions that the articles in this special issue seek to address.

## Evaluation for children and with children

This issue builds upon *PLA Notes Number 25*, a previous special issue on children's participation that was edited by Vicky Johnson in 1996. While issue 25 focused on ethical concerns, institutional contexts, and participatory techniques, the current issue takes up discussions and case studies relating to the evaluation of participation. The issue begins with an article by Louise Chawla, which reviews some major areas of discussion during the Oslo symposium. It briefly summarises the presentations given

at the symposium on initiatives currently underway to involve children in actively planning and managing different spheres of their lives, such as school or the local community. It then presents several areas of consensus among symposium members regarding the characteristics of participatory programmes that are authentic partnerships. It also notes that organisations have tended to take either of two approaches to evaluating programme quality. One gives children the methods and skills that they need in order to determine their own priorities in terms of programme outcomes, and to document whether or not these goals are being met. A second approach brings in external evaluators to define and document the achievement of goals. The article notes that these two approaches are sometimes treated as an "either/or" choice, but that they are not necessarily incompatible.

The article by Jasmine Rajbhandary, Roger Hart and Chandrika Khatiwada illustrates how these two approaches can be brought together. It is an example of **evaluation research** in which professional agency staff and an external consultant led an ambitious initiative to understand the history and functioning of children's clubs in Nepal, with the intention of establishing methods and drawing conclusions that could be applied by other organisations and communities to improve the design and evaluation of similar programmes. At the same time, this article describes an effort to introduce a number of methods for **participatory monitoring and evaluation** that children themselves could adopt and incorporate into their self-management of their clubs.

Three other articles also bridge these two approaches of external evaluation and participatory evaluation. Chris Mclvor from Zimbabwe and Glynis Clacherty and Johanna Kistner from South Africa share their observations and reflections as they report on programmes for young people in informal settlements and townships. In each case, the programmes they have assessed involve young people themselves as researchers to document the lives of other children in these harsh environments. From the United States, Kim Sabo reports on her interviews with young people to understand the benefits that they themselves believe they gain from different degrees of autonomy in planning and evaluating programmes on their own behalf. These three articles are examples of external research, which seeks to understand what happens to young people when they are involved in participatory research.

Two articles focus on the principles of participatory monitoring and evaluation, and how to integrate its processes into the day-to-day operations of development agencies. Lalitha Iyer, from India, and Robert Nurick and Vicky Johnson, from the United Kingdom, share their experience with projects around the world that have

attempted to carry out child-centred community development. This approach involves children in setting and monitoring goals for the programmes that serve their communities and themselves.

A final set of articles presents **analyses of settings for participation**. Annette Giertsen of Norway outlines the questions which an organisation must ask itself in order to determine how well it supports children's participation. Barry Percy-Smith and Karen Malone, from the United Kingdom and Australia, discuss the difficulties in involving young people in planning at the neighbourhood level, along with ways in which local governments can create structures for young people's input and influence. Jo Boyden reflects upon why refugee settings are especially problematic locations for participation.

This special issue is the first of several articles and book chapters that will be published as an outcome of the Oslo symposium. The questions that it addresses regarding how to document opportunities for children to have a voice in the settings of their everyday lives, how to determine whether these initiatives actually serve the ideals of the CRC, and how to make evaluation itself a partnership between children and adults, are complex. This issue of *PLA Notes* can only contribute some initial answers. We hope, nevertheless, that this issue will inspire further efforts to identify what happens when children have opportunities to play an active role in shaping their communities and the conditions for their own well-being, and that it will help to promote practices that give children opportunities to be heard in meaningful and creative ways.

**Nadia Auriat, Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme, Division of Social Sciences, Research and Policy, UNESCO 1, rue Miollis, 75732 Paris Cedex 15, France**  
[n.auriat@unesco.org](mailto:n.auriat@unesco.org)

**Per Miljeteig, Childwatch International, P.O. Box 1132, Blindern, N-0317 Oslo, Norway**  
[per.miljeteig@childwatch.uio.no](mailto:per.miljeteig@childwatch.uio.no)

**Louise Chawla, Whitney Young College, Kentucky State University, Frankfort, KY 40601, U.S.A.**  
[Chawla393@aol.com](mailto:Chawla393@aol.com)

## Note

For more information about the MOST Programme of UNESCO, the Growing Up in Cities project and Childwatch International, see:  
[www.unesco.org/most/growing.htm](http://www.unesco.org/most/growing.htm) and  
[www.childwatch.uio.no](http://www.childwatch.uio.no)

## Acknowledgments

Many people helped to bring this special issue of *PLA Notes* to completion. In particular, we want to thank Sheridan Bartlett of the Children's Environments Research Group of the City University of New York, Laura Greenwood of the Children's Rights Information Network, and the *PLA Notes* editorial team at the International Institute for Environment and Development. Olga Nieuwenhuys and the University of Amsterdam provided a friendly place where most of this issue was assembled. We also thank our sponsoring organisations, the MOST Programme of UNESCO and Childwatch International, for making this issue and the symposium on which it is based possible.

## References

- Boyden, J. and Ennew, J. 1997. *Children in Focus – a manual for participatory research with children*. Radda Barnen (Save the Children Fund Sweden), Stockholm.
- Chawla, L. (Ed.) 2001. *Growing Up in an Urbanising World*. UNESCO/Earthscan Publications, Paris/London.
- Driskell, D. 2001. *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth*. UNESCO/Earthscan Publications, Paris/London.
- Flekkøy, M. G. and Kaufman, N. H. 1997. *The Participation Rights of the Child*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
- Hart, R. 1992. *Children's Participation: from tokenism to citizenship*, UNICEF International Child Development Centre, Florence.
- Hart, R. 1997. *Children's Participation: the theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*. UNICEF/Earthscan Publications, New York/London.
- Holden, C. and Clough, N. (Eds). 1998. *Children as Citizens: education for participation*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
- Johnson, V. (Ed.) 1996. Special issue on children's participation. *PLA Notes Number 25*. International Institute for Environment and Development, London.
- Johnson, V. et al. (Eds). 1998. *Stepping Forward: children and young people's participation in the development process*. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.
- Mclvor, C. (Ed.) 1999. *The Earth in Our Hands*. Save the Children Fund, London.
- Miljeteig, P. 2000. *Creating Partnerships with Working Children and Youth*. Social Protection Discussion Paper No. 0021. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- United Nations. 1990. *World Declaration and Plan of Action from the World Summit for Children*, New York.
- de Winter, M. 1997. *Children as Fellow Citizens*. Radcliffe Medical Press, Oxford.