

How can organisations facilitate children's participation?

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Introduction

This presentation is based on experiences of Save the Children Norway (SCN). Our commitment to children's participation is rooted in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Although children have participated in different processes for a long time, their participation has not always been recognised. The CRC makes an important contribution to the recognition of children's participation by addressing it explicitly and giving it a framework. So do organisations – by making children's participation visible and calling attention to its advantages and possibilities as well as its pitfalls and limitations.

Children's participation is defined and understood in a variety of ways. For SCN it means that children are able to express their views and participate in influencing decisions on matters that concern them. This includes influencing the society in which they are growing up.

Like other social phenomena, children's participation has to be assessed according to its objective and context. Children's participation in itself will not be sufficient to warrant support. Values that the participation is based upon and conveys will also matter. For example, SCN would not support children in becoming child soldiers or prostitutes, but would support them in searching for alternatives to harmful life choices.

SCN supports children's participation in different ways: by supporting partner organisations' projects where children are invited to participate; or by responding to children's initiatives and working with children's groups as partners. Most often, SCN supports projects that invite children to participate. This work should be guided by the following principles:

- Ask the children first! Before the project's objectives are decided, children, families and local communities should have a say about what they want the project to achieve. This is a way to ensure that the project is in the best interests of the child.
- Clarify why and how the organisation wants the children to participate. Be transparent about it. Enable the children to decide whether they want to participate

or not. Participation must be meaningful, related to the children's context.

- Learn about the children's experiences, age and maturity, and relate this knowledge to the type of participation expected. Ensure that children who participate have the required skills.
- Define limits and be clear about limitations, in a way that encourages children's growth and independence.

Two examples from Nicaragua

With the preceding principles in mind, we will look at two examples supported by SCN, emphasising dimensions like: who took the initiative, practical conditions, children's contributions and project outcomes. We will also look at the meaning that children's participation can have for project development. The examples show that, by offering children an opportunity to participate, they will make their independent contributions to the shaping of the project and take initiatives beyond the project frame.

- The first example, a project where children were trained as photographers, illustrates the ethical problem arising from starting a project and engaging children without having defined a follow-up. This example also shows that securing a certain level of preparation gives children a basis for taking on responsibilities beyond adults' expectations.
- The second case, the development of a children's radio programme, shows how a group of adults who channelled their professional interests towards children managed to give them an opportunity to promote their rights and develop a profession. The children went beyond their role as journalists by taking action in addition to reporting. This made the project more action oriented.

1. When child workers become photographers

In 1996, a photographer in Nicaragua offered a course to a group of eight working children, one girl and seven boys between the age of 12 and 18. The course comprised two sessions of four and five weekends each. Six of the

children were from three small villages and two were from Managua. The intention was to give them a possibility to express themselves through photos and provide them with an alternative to their work as shoe-shiners, servants or coffee harvesters. It was also a possibility for them to make cultural contributions. The children learned how the camera functions, different angles to frame a picture, and darkroom work. Each of them employed a used but well-maintained camera and got some weeks to take the photos they wanted.

The children's work resulted in a photo exhibition, which was shown in the Cultural Centre of Managua, in the villages of the children and at the Forum with Working Children in Oslo. The mayor from one of the villages of the photographers visited the exhibition in Managua and commented that he had never expected children from his village to be able to take such photos. The children took on jobs as photographers in their villages. They are still contacted to photograph weddings, confirmations and other family and school events. Some of them have also arranged workshops and trained other working children as photographers.

An adult-initiated and driven project offering photographic expression and a profession to children

SCN took the initiative by asking four of its non-governmental partner organisations (NGOs) if they were interested in giving two of the children in their respective projects a course in photography. The photographer prepared a plan, which SCN and the NGOs accepted. The children received the plan but had not been invited to participate in its preparation. When the course ended, the photographer, the NGOs and the children made an agreement on the storing and use of the cameras, the responsibility for maintaining them and the purchase and development of films. The intention was to support the children's continued work as photographers. SCN and the NGOs signed the agreement.

In retrospect, it is clear that there was a lack of inclusion of children in the planning, preparation of follow-up and signing of the agreement.

SCN paid all the expenses of the course, while the exhibition localities were provided free of charge.

Children's contributions and project outcome

Six of the eight children responded positively to the course and continued. The two from Managua left the project, as they had other commitments. The outcome of the project was the professional training of a group of children and the increase of self-esteem that this caused. Getting a profession and greater self-confidence enabled the children to establish themselves as photographers in their villages, and also to make the decision of training other

children. In this way the child photographers have been able to help other children who were working in the street get new jobs, for example in a photo shop. One of the child trainers sees this as her contribution to reduce the number of children involved in the worst forms of child labour.

In addition, the child photographers found a new way to express and share their views with other people beyond their own group. They did so through photos but also through the texts they added to the photos, such as this text accompanying a photo of a boy doing shoe-shining:

One day while I was taking photos, I looked through the lens of the camera and saw some children shining shoes as I used to do. I felt butterflies in my stomach, and a feeling of uncertainty overwhelmed me. I don't know if I felt sadness or joy.

When the project was started, the expected outcome was defined as providing children with a way of expressing themselves through photography. The experiences from the first course were so positive that a second course was offered, which gave a sufficient basis for the children to work as professionals and train other children.

There is a risk in starting a project when a follow-up is not clearly defined, as children may be left with unfulfilled expectations when the project finishes. This example shows the importance of giving children a relevant offer of good quality, following attentively how the process develops by ensuring close communication with the children, and having the necessary resources to continue the project. Children will most often know if they want to continue, and if so, when and how to do it. The project shows how to support children's initiatives, even when they grow out of experiences introduced by adults, so that they can go beyond what we as adults have foreseen.

2. When school children become radio journalists

In 1991 a group of journalists in a town in Nicaragua invited a group of children to make a 30 minute weekly radio programme at a local radio station. The programme was called *Los Cumiches*, which means "the smaller ones". After three to four years, the children's radio programme lost more and more air time on the local radio, so adults took the initiative to raise funds together with the children to buy their own radio station. In 1996 they succeeded through support from the community and some Save the Children organisations. At that time, 60 children between the age of 6 and 14 participated and began to broadcast their programmes for six hours a day. Former child radio workers, who had passed the age of 18, got a weekly time slot for their broadcast. They are still working independently on this.

The children participating in the radio programmes come from the schools in the poorest areas of the town. In their programmes they address situations related to their rights: for example, how to get water in the school, improve the school sanitation system and get desks for more pupils. They often present interviews with local administrators. In addition to their role as reporters, they have taken action, for example, to get more school desks. On one occasion the children observed a working child being beaten by a policeman. They tried to interfere without succeeding and called on some adults to help them. They then presented the case on their radio programme, contacted adult journalists and denounced the policeman.

On the radio programmes the children also sing, present music and answer letters from listeners, thus letting other children express themselves. In addition they organise leisure and cultural activities in their schools.

Children and adults meet weekly to plan which issues to present on the radio and how to prepare them.

An adult-initiated project giving children an opportunity to express themselves, take action, promote the rights of the child, and become radio journalists and sound technicians

The radio station was started by a group of adult journalists who wanted to offer a group of children assistance in making a radio programme. The adults first received support and training from an NGO on how to prepare a project plan and manage a project. Then the journalists established themselves as an NGO. SCN supported them financially and technically. The project also carried out its own fund-raising. The radio programme established a support network consisting of teachers and parents from the community.

The project is based on children's activities as journalists and reporters. The programme reaches a countless number of children. A survey was conducted with children in the town and neighbouring communities, asking them if they listened to *Los Cumiches* and what they thought about the programme. According to the answers, the radio programme seems to have an impact on their lives because they recognise that they have a channel for their opinions and that other children stand up for their rights.

Children's contribution and project outcome

In 1993, children within and outside the radio programme made important efforts in promoting their views. Nearly 10,000 children from 15 schools participated in a process of analysing their school situation, identifying problems and their causes, and coming up with proposals. The problems and proposals were presented to the local authorities, who for the first time listened openly to a group of children. The children involved in the radio

project played an important role in getting the messages out. In addition, the same children were active in relation to the Municipal Commission for Children's Rights. The adult representative of the radio station spoke on behalf of the children and the children had access to meetings as radio reporters, which allowed them to broadcast issues and discussions.

Children in the project receive training as journalists, radio reporters and sound technicians and get professional background in these areas. By promoting their rights and taking action to implement them, they have increased awareness of the CRC among the population of Nicaragua, and changed many adults' views of children, so that they see children as having rights. The greatest importance of the radio programme probably lies in the impact it has on the children who participate. They develop as persons with increased self-esteem, get a vision of life where they can take an active role, and see themselves as future adults with professions. Their capacity to report on issues and also take action gives a new dimension to the project.

Dilemma

The project is dependent on external financial support. However, when the radio programme developed into an independent radio station, a question arose: should a children's radio station work on the same premises as other radio stations and be responsible for its own funding, for example through advertisements? According to the adults in the programme, if they had to divide their efforts between fund-raising and follow-up with the children, the work with the children would suffer. SCN has continued to support the project, although with reduced funding. This is partly due to the consideration that the project should be at least partially self-supporting. The project continues to operate in this way.

Concluding remarks

In the two examples above, it is interesting to note how children take on initiatives and responsibilities when offered participation. When the child journalists added action to their work as reporters, they contributed to further enrich the project. The child photographers initiated new activities outside the original project goals by training other children.

One of the main contributions that organisations can offer to children is to help them to find a space where they can come together and to offer them relevant training. The training may be, for example, on how to run a club, to set up street theatres, to address urgent problems, to prepare a project proposal, to do fundraising or to become a professional. Furthermore, organisations can listen to children, analyse initiatives together with them and, if agreed by both sides, support their initiatives.

Overarching issues are adults' capacity to communicate with children in different situations, and their awareness of their role as facilitators, knowing when and how to intervene without taking over from the children. Organisations' financial contributions are often essential, but funding needs to be complemented by staff members' competence in seeing and discussing dilemmas and analysing their own roles as adults. Organisations also need to know how to cooperate and support movements in civil society in order to strengthen children's participation. Facilitating meaningful participation means creating conditions that enable children to develop what they find relevant for themselves, at local, national, regional and international levels.

However, before an organisation takes these steps, some prerequisites should be considered. The organisation itself has to be convinced of the value of children's participation and the need to promote it. These attitudes should extend to all parts of the organisation. A strategy paper and policy document should serve as a common reference.

Facilitating children's participation also means that organisations should seek to understand what children think about their participation and how it affects children and their development, as well as adults around them.

It is also vital to reflect on values and risks, as well as ethical and methodological dilemmas. To a greater extent, organisations should monitor their work on children's participation in ways that include these aspects. Children should be part of this effort. In fundamental ways, successful participation requires a paradigm shift among organisations, as they reconceptualise their role as not working for but *with* children.

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