

Children in the driver's seat

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Introduction

We missed our playtime, free time and even marriage celebrations! But we are very proud that we were able to do something for our village. We have identified our problems, we know the solutions and also how to get them solved....
Child researcher at a process documentation workshop, Bangalore, 1–3 April 2005

The Concerned for Working Children (CWC) has been working with children, especially the most marginalised, for over 25 years in India.¹ Our objective is to empower children to enable their participation in processes of governance and in the formulation of plans, solutions and strategies on matters that affect them. We believe that all groups, including children, should participate in decisions concerning them. This belief, carried over from our involvement with the informal sector and unorganised workers, has been one of the primary principles underlying our work with children since the late 1970s, well before the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991.

¹ CWC is a secular, democratic, national, private development agency working in partnership with working children, their communities and local governments to implement viable, comprehensive, sustainable and appropriate solutions. See www.workingchild.org for more details of our work.

The study of access and mobility conducted by the children of Kundapura Taluk, which is described in this article, was born of a needs assessment these children had done in their villages.² They completed a very complex exercise of developing five-year plans as part of the tenth national five-year planning of the government of India. Issues related to access and mobility, especially transport, had been flagged as a priority. So when the University of Durham, UK approached CWC in November 2004 with a proposal to carry out a study in three countries (Ghana, South Africa and India) on Children's Mobility and Access, in consultation with children, we accepted as it matched a need already identified by children.

The children themselves conducted the study and CWC developed the capacity of partner organisations to enable this. The study had the following principal objectives:

- to enable children to access, obtain and manage information appropriately, in order to empower them to become researchers in their own right;
- to enable children to identify problems, access and analyse data, and use the resulting information to take control of

² Kundapura Taluk is a revenue division consisting of 56 panchayats on the West Coast of India in the state of Karnataka.

the issues they face and develop solutions to overcome them; and

- to demonstrate that children are capable of participating effectively in all democratic processes and that their participation can bring about structural changes in the community.

Context of the study

The study aimed to understand the transport, mobility and access issues of children from diverse backgrounds and situations.

The child research protagonists

The researchers were boys and girls aged nine to 18 years, from socially and economically marginalised groups. Eighty-five percent were school-going and the remainder were working children. One hundred and forty-nine children conducted the study.

The respondents

The respondents were aged six to 18 years, with equal numbers of boys and girls, including working and school-going children, and children who are differently abled. Over 300 children participated as respondents in the study.

Location

The study was conducted in three *gram panchayats* of southern Karnataka, each with different characteristics.³ Each *panchayat* had between 950 and 1200 households and a population of between 5500 and 6500. The three *panchayats* were underdeveloped, poor and lacking transport and mobility facilities, especially for children. They were also new to CWC, as we wanted to demonstrate to partners anew how children could be facilitated to do their own research.

Time frame

The study was conducted over a period of seven months, from October 2004 to April 2005. This period was intensely hectic for the researchers. It was a big challenge for the children to find time to conduct such an extensive research exercise amidst all their domestic responsibilities and work/school pressures. They managed this by conducting the study either during holidays or in the early morning or late evenings, outside school and working hours. Despite the time constraints, all the children who participated enjoyed the process and were proud of their achievements.

³ *Gram panchayats* (often shortened to '*panchayats*') are village councils which take decisions on every important decision in village political life.

Box 1: A participant's reflections on the inception workshop

The project got off to a great start with a participatory, child-centred workshop organised by CWC in Karnataka, India.... In the space of the five-day workshop, the children used their knowledge of their transport problems to develop a research framework, and pilot test three tools for conducting research into these problems....

For the adults the children's perspectives were revealing. Children engaged in a range of transport activities.... Their transport responsibility results in late attendance in school and tires them out, making it difficult for them to concentrate. It also takes up a lot of their time. They face very different hazards to adults: they cross busy roads; they climb over rocks or big roots of trees; jump over gullies; ford streams; and walk on slippery bridges.

Working with CWC ... made the project team realise that if the project is to do more than pay lip service to children's participation, it needs to widen its scope. Children must be empowered to use the information generated by the research to advocate on their own behalf, to be in control, and to be a part of decision-making processes and interventions. This is their right to participation, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Children....

Source: Priyanthi Fernando, then Secretary of the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD), UK

The process

The project started with an inception workshop designed and facilitated by CWC (Box 1). The participants were researchers from the UK, Ghana and South Africa, some of CWC's field facilitators and 29 children from the selected panchayats.

Additional sessions were held with adults throughout the five days to provide in-depth understanding of the concepts and principles of children's rights, participation and empowerment, as well as acquiring skills of facilitation. The children, besides understanding the significance of 'information management by children' for their active and effective participation, designed the methodology and developed appropriate tools to conduct the study. The methodology and the tools were field tested and fine-tuned. Subsequently the children went back to their villages with a specific action plan for conducting the research.

The children identified more child researchers to help conduct the study based on criteria developed by them, which reflected principles of non-discrimination, respect, sustainability and equality. This was followed by continuous fieldwork by the children, with intermittent training workshops conducted by CWC. On completion of the study, representative child researchers met at a workshop to consolidate the findings, document the process of the study and

Children arriving at a framework for their research



Researchers doing an extensive mobility PRA



Photos: The Concerned for Working Children, India

develop advocacy strategies to find appropriate solutions to the problems they raised.

Simultaneously, on request from the Ghana partner, CWC trained a group of 13 children and four adults to conduct the study in Ghana. During this process, children were facilitated to design the process and methodology, develop appropriate tools and materials, and field-test their study.

When the studies in all three countries were completed, CWC and the project initiators organised a workshop with child researchers from India, Ghana and South Africa and adult partners to consolidate the findings and develop advocacy strategies in Cape Coast, Ghana. The programme concluded with a meeting with the minister of transport in Ghana in which he assured the child researchers that he

Box 2: Excerpt from PRA Exercise, Aajri *panchayat*, November 2005

There is a small bridge from Aajri to Jangsale, which is in bad condition. Fifty to sixty children and 200 to 300 adults use this route. At present, as the bridge is broken, they have to walk 6 to 7 kilometres. People are finding it very difficult, especially children who go to school. The bridge should be repaired for easy transport.

Box 3: Excerpt from observation map, Gujjadi *panchayat*, March 3, 2005

In Hebbarball-Manki area in Gujjadi *panchayat* there is a stream that runs across the footpath leading to Nayakwadi village. During the rainy season, it is impossible to cross this stream and children are forced to walk around it on either side. However, there are many cashew trees along these paths, which make it difficult to walk along. Children worry about getting their clothes and belongings caught and torn on the branches of the trees. *Anganwadi*-aged children (pre-schoolers, aged three to five) are not able to take this route at all.

would integrate their findings and demands into the country's transport policy.

The methodology

The methodology and the tools for conducting the study were developed and designed by the children themselves through numerous workshops. They used multiple methods to conduct the study to make sure their findings were accurate.

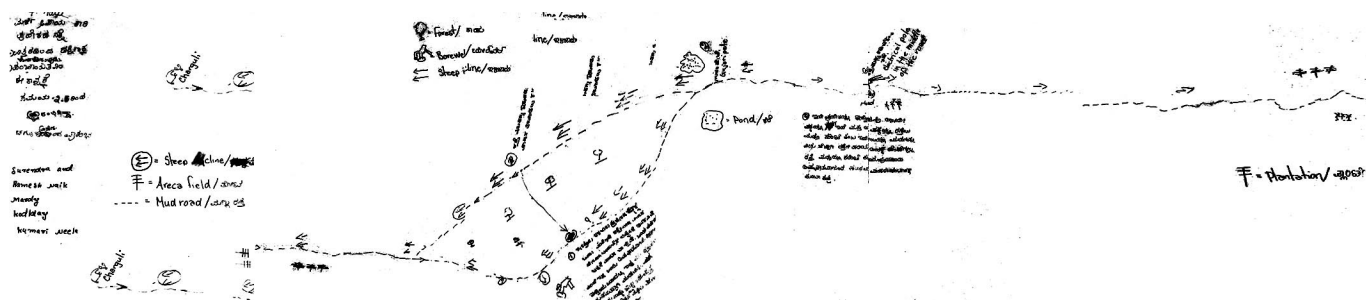
Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA)

The objective of the PRA was to help children identify and map resources as well as list problems and issues related to them in each *panchayat* (Box 2). It also helped them to understand the socio-cultural, political and economic conditions of their *panchayat*. The PRA consisted of studying secondary information, walkathon and mapping, and focus group discussions. On completion of the activity, the map of the *panchayat* was recreated in a large open space and the information collected was presented and discussed with the community, facilitating their inputs into finding solutions.

Observation mapping

Children developed observation maps along the routes which they found most difficult to use, as identified during the PRA. Their list of indicators for mapping included: potholes, trees, drainage, bridges, culverts, school, crèche, houses, agricultural fields, wells, ration shop, mud road and black-topped road. They documented in detail any problems with any of the indicators demarcated on their maps (see Box 3 for an example).

Map of mobility problems related to road



Box 4: Interview with Manjula, 6 February 2005

Manjula, a 13-year-old working child from Nayakwadi, is able to walk to the shop as it is close by. However, in order to get to the market or the ration store, she needs to take the bus. It is a problem for her to go to these places because it takes a long time and she has a lot of work to do at home. It is also a problem for her to carry heavy loads, since there are many ups and downs and small stones along the route. There are forests on either side of the route Manjula takes to get to the hospital, temple, and to fetch water. She also has to pass a cemetery, which frightens her. There is a water facility close to her house but it does not supply water regularly.

Box 5: A sample flash card profile: Raghavendra, February 2005

Raghavendra is a 14-year-old school-going boy. In order to get to school, he has to walk 35 minutes along a mud road and then a tar road, both full of potholes. During the rainy season, when the potholes fill with water, vehicles splash the muddy water all over him, soiling his clothes. There is also a very steep incline along this route, which is difficult for him to climb when he is carrying a heavy load, and during the rainy season he worries that he may slip. Raghavendra also has to pass by a graveyard, which frightens him. He must also take this route when he goes to his friend's house, the ration shop, the hospital, the town, the hotel, the milk dairy and the provision store. Raghavendra has suggested that the potholes be filled and the road levelled and paved.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted to collect information from children living along routes identified as difficult or risky for children during the PRA (Box 4). Prior to the interviews, the child researchers developed an interview schedule.

Flash card exercise

The purpose of this exercise was to understand the different resources children access and the mode of transport used and distances/time taken to reach those resources. This was done by developing flash cards with illustrations or

Child researchers conducting an interview



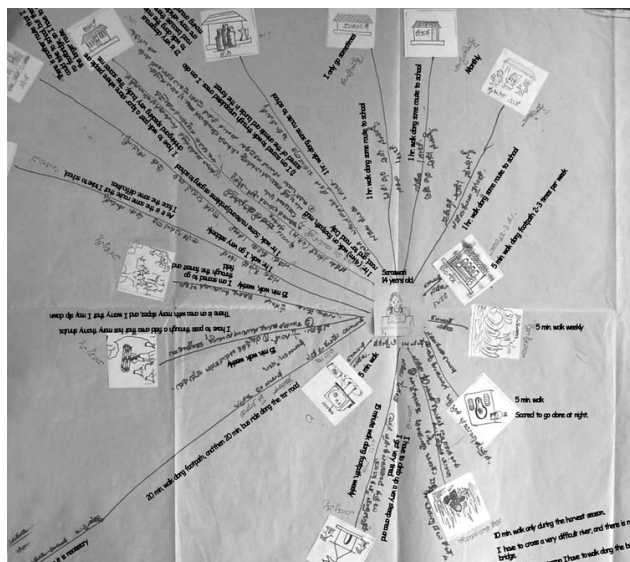
Compiling findings from their FGD



Photos: The Concerned for Working Children, India

Mobility profile of a child informant

Photos: The Concerned for Working Children, India



pictures to represent the respondent, the resources that the respondent accesses, the various modes of transportation used by children, the obstacles children face in accessing those resources, and 'seasons' cards representing various seasons of the year. The respondent picked each of the cards applicable to her/him and discussed them with the researcher, having placed them on a large sheet of paper. This provided the researcher with a detailed mobility profile of the respondent.

Traffic count

The traffic count exercise was designed to develop a clear idea of:

- the kinds of loads children carry;
- the modes of transport they use to carry these loads;
- frequency of carrying loads;
- weight of the loads;
- the distances loads are carried; and
- the difficulties children face along the way while carrying loads.

The child researchers positioned themselves in teams of two or three, dressed as traffic inspectors with banners publicising their study, at the main places children frequent, e.g. school, ration shop, milk dairy and factories. They weighed the loads children carried and filled in a questionnaire that they had earlier developed. This provided them with a detailed profile of the loads children carry. These include milk, groceries, cattle feed, firewood, agricultural products for sale, and kerosene, and are mostly carried whilst going to or from

Box 6: More reflections on the inception workshop

I did not expect such a marvellous experience and it was totally different from what I thought before coming here. The kids sitting here have been marvellous. They have taught me things that I have never known before. I have been doing research in transport for the last 24 years and I have learnt more in these five days than those 24 years from you children. I have also realised that I had ignored a very significant group of people in all my research, that is children....

Something interesting is going on here that we have not seen before – children planning their own life. I will leave a promise with you that I will do my best to uphold what you are doing here in Ghana as well, which some day you could come and see.

Source: Professor Albert Abane, Head of the Department of Geography, Transport and Tourism, University of Cape Coast

school. The most frequent mode of transport was head load. It was found that children carry loads weighing up to 25 kilogrammes.

Focus group discussions

The children used focus group discussions to fill in gaps and make clarifications. In each *panchayat* they held three to four group discussions, with school-going children and working children meeting separately.

Benefits and challenges

The ultimate objective of this research process was to empower children by facilitating them to acquire new skills and information and enabling them to use this information to change their lives for the better. The process of the research has equipped the children with skills and expertise in information management, including applying methods, developing appropriate tools, discussing with children and other stakeholders confidently, putting over their points with appropriate data, advocating their cause nationally and internationally, and finding appropriate solutions to their problems. The children who participated in the research now have an identity and are highly recognised in the villages involved. They have become highly aware of their right to know and the need to participate and are exploring various fora for making their voices heard. The adult researchers involved also learnt a great deal from the process (Box 6).

The children faced immense challenges in carrying out the research. They found juggling their regular schooling/work, domestic chores and work on the research very difficult. They also faced a certain amount of ridicule from

Doing a Traffic enumeration and load assessment



Photo: The Concerned for Working Children, India

some quarters of the community, who doubted the value of the children's work. Some were even offensive saying, 'They are keenly involved in the project because girls and boys can meet up!' In some cases they were turned away by adults when they went to collect information from children and some parents were unwilling to let the researchers participate in the research. Not many children gave into their parents' demands as they recognised the benefit of being part of the process. The children also lost their playtime, missed marriage parties, holidays, and opportunities to visit

friends and relatives. However, the children said they had gained more than they lost.

Sustaining the process

Research by children has enabled them to gain control over the research process as well as to have ownership of the information they have collected. The researchers have formed their own organisations with other children and are working with various stakeholders in the community to address the problems identified, such as getting footbridges, starting crèches, filling potholes, and blacktopping roads. They are also negotiating with key stakeholders such as the *gram panchayats* and school authorities to institutionalise children's participation. They are in the process of setting up *makkala panchayats* (children's village councils) in each of the panchayats. They want to ensure that children's participation in decision-making and governance is permanent and official.

Conclusion

Children's participation in research and social planning is not an end in itself, but rather it is a process that continuously needs to be re-evaluated and to evolve according to their needs. Research and advocacy by children has successfully enabled active participation of children in democratic processes. They are leading the way in making governments accountable. Children have started a revolution for change and the adult world is yet to catch up with them and respond adequately.

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NOTE

The author is currently preparing another article for publication in *Participatory Learning and Action* on ethical guidelines for child-led research.

FURTHER READING

For further information about child-led research, see:
 Lolichen, P. J. (2002) *Children and their Research: a process document*. Bangalore: The Concerned for Working Children.
 Lolichen, P.J. (2006) *Taking a Right Turn: children lead the way in research*. Bangalore: The Concerned for Working Children.

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