

How far have we come with youth in governance?

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by JENNIFER TANG

Introduction

Children have agency.¹ Recognising this, those promoting children's rights advocate for their participation in the governance of their communities. How children and youth are engaged in governance activities takes different forms – with various degrees of success. Programmes and projects that promote children's and youth's engagement in governance (or CYEG) often come from a commitment to enact children's rights to participate, and the conviction that duty bearers (especially governments) must use governance structures, systems and processes that best respond to the needs and challenges of all citizens. An analytical framework that draws out the many integrated and – in some cases – mutually reinforcing factors that promote children's participation and good governance would

be useful for ensuring that commitments are implemented thoroughly.² My aim is to develop such a framework.

Frameworks for analysing the quality of children's participation exist, as do frameworks for analysing the quality of governance systems. An analytical framework that addresses the interaction of these is lacking. How do we assess, in terms of extent and quality, the way participatory governance models or experiences involve and address the perspectives of children and young people? Recognising this gap, I am interested in developing a framework that can be used by children, youth, governance officials and facilitators of CYEG activities to critically reflect on their work.

The framework I present in this article is in the early stages of its development. I first give some background to this work

¹ 'Agency' refers to an individual's capacity to make his or her own choices and to act independently, according to his or her own will. Agency is set against structural factors such as class, religion and customs, which externally influence an individual's choices and opportunities (Milligan and Wilson, 2011).

² The concept of good governance is complex and dynamically debated. I draw on the definitions used by the UNDP and the World Bank with their emphasis on participation, transparency, accountability and process, as summarised in Taylor (2000).



Photos: Child Friendly Cities Initiative Sudan

Community members using the CFCCI community assessment tool to assess the child-friendliness of their communities.

and how I have approached its development so far. The writeshop – and the youth and participatory governance practitioners who have contributed to this issue of *PLA* – offered an opportunity to discuss with them which elements they considered crucial in such a framework. I finish by sharing how I will proceed in completing, piloting and refining the analytical framework. I invite those who share my interests and/or have experience in analysing CYEG to provide feedback on my framework-in-progress.

Background

My interest in analysing children and youth engagement in governance came from my work with the Children's Environments Research Group, an academic organisation in the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. We were invited by the Innocenti Research Center of UNICEF to develop a research project that would facil-



itate deeper analysis and implementation of the Child Friendly Cities and Communities initiative (CFCCI).

The CFCCI is a voluntary coalition of cities and communities committed to implementing policies and services that respect the rights of children, and sustaining governance structures that uphold these systems. Aiming to support the transformation of these commitments into real changes in children's lives, the Children's Environments Research Group developed tools to look critically at these issues.

As a research associate assisting in the

development of these tools I became interested in the area of CYEG. I noticed that the tools asked governance officials and community-based organisations if children participated in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies, plans and services for children. But they did not examine the quality of their engagement. Some communities had begun to engage children and youth in governance, each employing a different model of engagement, adapted to the context and needs of that community. This aroused my curiosity as to how far such initiatives enabled children's rights to participation while promoting good governance.

Developing the framework

In the introduction of *PLA's* first special issue on children's participation (*PLA Notes* 25, 1996), editor Vicky Johnson expressed the hope that it would be just the beginning of a continuing process of sharing and exchange. Since then, *PLA Notes* 42 (Chawla, 2001) and many other *PLA* articles have touched upon this subject. In fact, *PLA Notes* 42 lays out one of the bases for my area of inquiry. It discusses the linkages between the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the assessment of projects and programmes that would provide evidence that children's participation rights were being upheld.³ As Chawla makes clear, various scholars have highlighted the difficulty in generating universal criteria while making room for local indicators. These change depending on the context of each project or programme under evaluation. This requires balanced negotiations. Chawla advocates that we foster participation across formal and informal settings and apply this line of thinking to the issue of children's participation in governance. How can we both build upon experience in other areas where children's participation is more longstanding – and at the same time

shape and strengthen institutions so that they are better able to integrate children as actors?

With these challenges in mind, I reviewed literature on children's participation, drawing heavily on the children-focused work of Hart and Lansdown, Chawla and Driskell's ecological and spatial approaches to participation, United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) documents on responsive, accountable and democratic local governance, and the participatory governance work of Fung and Wright, and Gaventa. This helped me begin to identify factors relevant to analysing CYEG.

The framework I am developing is intended to be applied to any activity that engages children and youth in the governance of their communities. It is likely to be used by project implementers working on CYEG programmes. But it may be particularly useful if it can be applied repeatedly over time, to monitor developments over the medium to long term. The format needs to be people-friendly and child-friendly. It should also be used in the context of a participatory approach that brings together different types of actors (such as children, youth, community members and governance officials) who have different roles and perspectives to critically reflect upon their activities. It needs to stimulate critical reflection around key parameters by raising a series of questions. Participatory reflection and collective acknowledgement of gaps between intention and implementation will ideally help to stimulate changes in existing practice. The framework is not intended as some kind of 'gold standard' for purportedly objective or independent assessment of youth and participatory governance practitioners and their work, but as a set of prompts to reflection.

³ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a legally binding international instrument. The CRC recognises the human rights of children, defined as persons up to the age of 18 years. See: www.unicef.org/crc

Parameters for analysis

What are the fields in which children and young people tend to engage with governance? Key among them are policy formulation, community planning and local and national budgeting, which are covered in several articles in this issue of *PLA*. In what kinds of activity do they tend to participate – what are children and youth doing when they engage in governance? The key ones seem to be advocacy activities, appraisal, monitoring and evaluation of policies, plans and budgets as well as programmes and projects. This applies across a wide range of issues and sectors such as social services, education, environmental health, public health, public works, public awareness, juvenile justice, transportation, play and recreation.

The framework

Indicators and criteria for assessing children's participation in development or community programmes and common participatory governance indicators seem to fall into three categories or components:

- assessing spaces, structures and systems;
- assessing processes; and
- assessing resources and support.

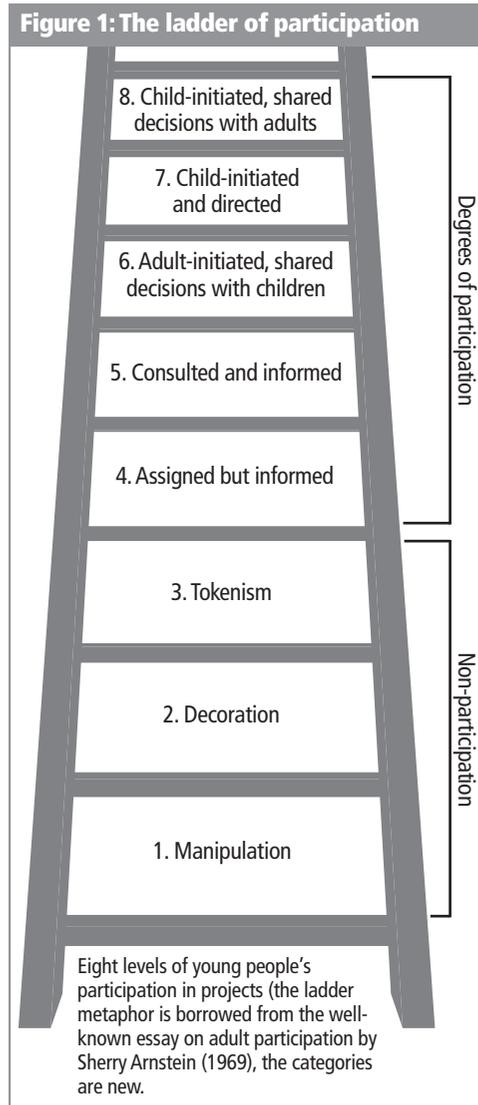
I discuss each of these in turn, defining them and beginning to reflect on them from a CYEG perspective.

Assessing spaces, structures and systems

The focus here is on the frames or channels by which children become engaged. Of interest are:

- spaces, structures and systems that are institutionalised and those that are not;
- the 'invited' spaces and 'claimed' spaces (Gaventa, 2006) and the dynamics that can change one into the other;
- how spaces or systems are set-up, reshaped or dismantled;
- how they work with other spaces, structures and systems of youth participation; and
- other institutions of governance.

Two elements seem important here.



Hart's ladder of participation showing eight levels of children's participation – from non-participation to increasing degrees of participation.

Source: Hart (1992).

First, the level of engagement and the degree of children's participation: whether it is consultative, collaborative or child-managed, child-initiated or child-led. One existing way of analysing degrees of children's participation is Hart's ladder above. I need to give consideration to whether and how Hart's ladder or other existing frameworks could be best adapted to the specific issues of CYEG.

Box 1: Recognition of children's participation as a right

- Does the CYEG activity explicitly or implicitly draw on child rights principles?
- Does it recognise children's participation as a right?
- Does it recognise children's participation in governance as a child's right?
- Does it recognise children's right to participation as inalienable and indivisible?

The other important element is the degree of institutionalisation: to what extent do the organisations or bodies engaged in governance activities institutionalise the rights of children to participate? Some relevant factors to consider are:

- Is children's participation recognised as a right or is it granted as a perk?
- Is it representative or does it involve direct engagement?
- Is it *ad hoc* or integrated?
- Is it short term or sustained?
- Is it systematically documented?

I aim to develop a set of questions on each. Box 1 gives an example of such a set of questions relating to 'the recognition of children's participation as a right'. If governance activities fail to view and recognise children's participation as a right explicitly, their participation is precarious and can be cut off at any point with no justification given. Checking that children's and youths' participation is being treated as a right helps to safeguard it.

Assessing processes

The second component examines the quality of the process of engagement, by both children and youth and their counterparts in government. Once the stage is set and the space made or claimed, what happens there? Is it truly participatory? Does it promote children's participation? Does it improve the quality of governance or help embed the principles of a governance accountable to children? Are the processes:

- Responsive?
- Transparent?
- Accountable?

Box 2: Motivating, educating and promoting child and youth participation in governance

- Does the CYEG activity recognise the knowledge, skills and tools needed for effective engagement?
- Do children and youth understand the structures, systems and processes of governance and how they relate to each other?
- Do children and youth understand their role within the structures, systems and processes of governance?
- Are children and youth encouraged to analyse and constructively criticise how they are engaged in aspects of governance?
- Are children and youth engaged in governance activities supported to reach out to other children and youth?

- Effective?
- Respectful of local context?
- Sustainable?
- Self-reflective and critical?
- Participatory within? (i.e. non-discriminatory, inclusive of marginalised groups, egalitarian)
- Motivating, educating and promoting child and youth participation and governance?
- Ethical?

And in addition:

- Do they take place within a child-sensitive and enabling environment?
- Is it a safe and respectful environment?
- Is their participation both voluntary and relevant?

In Box 2, we see an attempt to apply a child-focused lens to a component featured in analyses of adult citizens' participation literature and practice (e.g. Gaventa and Barrett, 2010). One hypothesis is that low levels of youth and adult civic engagement may be because they have not **learnt** how to engage as citizens – or rather, have not had the opportunity to **practice** being an engaged citizen (Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008). We need to critically reflect on the value of CYEG. By actively promoting children's rights to participation, CYEG can be an important way to actively learn how to become more engaged citizens.



Photo: Child Friendly Cities Initiative Sudan.

The research team in Sudan adapted the CFCCI community assessment tool to facilitate participatory assessment and analysis.

Resources and support for children and youth engagement in governance

The third component highlights the fact that CYEG requires resources and support in ways that are adapted to the needs of the participants in the context in which they work. Just as children need to be trained in working in governance activities, those already engaged in governance need to be trained on how to work with children.

This is a critical factor that is not currently being analysed with the frameworks that we have. These activities cannot take place in isolation. They must be linked to the community, the work of other professionals and the families that support each individual child and adult. With this in mind, aspects that need consideration include:

- Staff are trained, committed and sensitive.
- There is training and support for children.
- There are community, professional and family links.
- There is a commitment of resources (including financial resources, physical space, time, and prioritisation of activities).

In order for CYEG activities to maintain their quality, the spaces, structures, systems and processes must be supported within a committed network that recognises the integral role of CYEG activities.

Some initial feedback

Practitioners implementing youth and participatory governance initiatives are obviously some of the best-placed actors

Box 3: Commitment of resources

- Have sufficient financial resources been committed to CYEG activities, including out-reach, training, planning, liaison, data collection, reporting, and evaluation?
- Are physical spaces set aside for children and youth to meet and conduct CYEG related activities?
- Do children feel welcome in their spaces (i.e. are these accessible, child-friendly, inclusive)?
- Is adequate time set aside by all the relevant actors and adequate priority assigned to CYEG related activities?
- Have resources been committed over multiple cycles (years) so as to ensure the continuity of CYEG activities?
- Have mechanisms been built in to review the commitment of resources?

to give feedback on the beginnings of this analytical framework. The *PLA* writeshop offered the ideal opportunity. Semi-structured individual interviews with several participants showed that the preliminary steps I had taken on the basis of my literature review resonated with their own experience and challenges from practice. They also generated additional factors that should be taken account of in the framework. Here is a sample of what they said:

- Is the activity child-friendly (as even sometimes child-initiated activities are not)? Is the activity aligned with international instruments? Were children and youth informed throughout the process? (Lipotso Musi, World Vision Lesotho).
- Consistency: when something is planned, do people respect this planning? Realism: are the planned actions achievable? (Serigne Malick Fall, Senegal).
- Do governance officials see youth as valuable partners in change? Are both youth as well as authorities equally and deeply committed in time, energy and work? How does the community at large perceive the activity? (Cynthia Ochola-Anyango, Jipange Youth Organisation, Nairobi, Kenya).
- What are the cultural contexts that both support and limit participation? What is the youth understanding of the governance environment, avenues and frameworks for change? (Kenyatta Maita, Plan, Kenya).

I now see that further practitioner inputs and feedback are indispensable for taking the framework forward and I am thinking about how best to continue gathering them and using them.

Conclusion

What has been presented is a snapshot of my thinking to date. This is a framework in development, a framework for analysing children's participation in governance. It will not be a set of guidelines for governance structures within which children's participation can occur. Instead, it is a series of questions for governments, communities and children to closely examine the degree and manners to which their structures, systems, spaces and processes promote elements of good governance and children's rights to participation.

As yet, the framework is in its early stages – and this article is a call for further inputs by experts in the field. By sharing this process and my work so far, I hope to foster discussion around the analysis of CYEG – and then to revise the framework to take account of new ideas and suggestions.

My next steps would be to validate this framework by 'field testing': with children and young people and their partners in governance work, among others. I then plan to refine it further and share with those interested in analysing their own work or others' on children's and youth's engagement in governance.

I welcome your input – including any suggestions you might have about relevant frameworks regarding children's participation, democratic governance and community decision-making – as well as raising any issues, areas and elements not yet considered in this draft framework. Please get in touch!

CONTACT DETAILS



Jennifer Tang
 Children's Environments Research Group
 Center for Human Environments
 The Graduate Center
 City University of New York
 Email: jtang@gc.cuny.edu
 Website: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/ceerg/>

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