

# Extracts from *The Children's Clubs of Nepal: a democratic experiment*<sup>1</sup>

# 5

**Jasmine Rajbhandary, Roger Hart  
and Chandrika Khatiwada**

## Introduction

Children's clubs have emerged as an important new kind of institution in Nepal over the past decade. They appear to be both an expression of, and a promise, for the advancement of democracy and children's rights. This article summarises the process used to evaluate the development and current state of functioning of about 300 of these clubs that have been supported by Save the Children Norway (SCN) and Save the Children US (SCUS). Their progress has been a remarkable natural experiment in the different ways that children can be involved in the management of their own organisations. For a full report of the evaluation and its recommendations, see Rajbhandary, Hart and Khatiwada (1999).



**Child club, Chitawan, Nepal**

It is being recognised increasingly in many countries that there are many advantages to children's having a greater voice in their own development and in the development of their communities. But this is invariably done on a project-by-project basis. It was our belief in designing this study that opportunities for children to act as agents in their own organisations offer the potential for a much more effective, authentic and sustainable approach to actively learning about rights and how to collaborate as more self-determining and caring citizens.

The sponsoring organisations sought to learn not only what was happening nationally in terms of the growth and general patterns of club membership and activities,

<sup>1</sup> This article has been abridged from a longer report of this name published by Save the Children (Norway) and Save the Children (US).

but also how the clubs functioned. In particular, it was thought important to learn to what extent the clubs fulfilled the goals of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as settings where children could learn about, and act upon, their rights. Finally, because the two agencies had recognized that they needed to improve their monitoring of the clubs, it was their hope that some of the participatory methods found to be effective in this research could be used by children's clubs as on-going tools.

## Design of the research

The goals of the research for both general national patterns and detailed questions of structure and process called for a multi-phased design. In addition to providing an account of the clubs' current membership patterns, structures and functioning, a primary goal was to develop methods that children and facilitators in any club could subsequently use to critically review their own functioning in order to improve their structure and activities. This required that participatory group methods be at the core of our approach. But this needed to be supplemented by individual interviews – as we knew that group methods often hide important individual differences and issues of power in the functioning of institutions. We also felt that it would be important to obtain the perspectives of non-club members and their parents about the place of clubs in their communities.

One of the central principles of participatory group methods is that the methods be simple and clear to a group unschooled in the use of research methods and that the analysis and interpretation of the data be carried out with the group themselves. Furthermore, many of the children in the clubs were not literate so we had to design methods that were visual. This involved considerable experimentation. When using group data of this kind, it is not possible to carry out any sophisticated statistical analyses. It is simply a systematisation of what they are capable of discussing themselves in any of their group meetings. For the more individual and subtle issues, we relied upon our lengthy semi-structured interviews with key informants, child club members, non-members and their parents. The three phases of the research are summarised below.

## **Retracing the history, background and purpose of the clubs**

Archival research and interviews with key policy makers and programme staff of SCN, SCUS and other participatory children's organisations in Nepal.

## **National survey**

A survey of members of a total of 180 SCN-and SCUS-supported clubs.

## **Case studies**

Covering all of the districts where SCN- and SCUS- work, seven "primary case study clubs" and 15 "secondary case studies" were selected. The primary case studies were visited for approximately seven days of intensive research involving both group sessions with children and interviews with children, parents and other actors. The secondary case study clubs were visited for only one or two days with only group sessions with children and interviews with one or two key child informants. (For the case study methods, see Box 1.)

### **Box 1 Case study methods**

#### **Interviews with key informants:**

These were usually the primary local SCN and SCUS staff person, any primary local volunteer/facilitator and the club chairperson.

#### **Group research with all club members:**

Household mapping\*  
Ranking movement game  
Participation card sorting regarding training workshops  
Scenario skits (four separate groups)  
Comparative activities and benefits chart \*  
Generation of activity preference categories  
Activity preference matrix \*  
Organisational diagram of club formal structure \*  
Organisational diagram of informal structure\*

#### **Interviews with sub-samples:**

The chairperson\*  
Three other board members\*  
Four general club members \*  
Club members' parents (2 of board members and 2 of general members)\*  
Non-club members (2)\*  
Non-club members' parents (2)  
A facilitator (if one exists)

#### **Community Feedback Session with the children**

After completion of collection of the data in each of the primary case study clubs, a meeting was held with the children who were executive board members and, when possible, with the facilitators, to discuss the overall findings.

\*All of the above methods were used with seven "primary case study clubs" which were visited for approximately seven days each. The methods that are starred were also used with 15 "secondary case study clubs," which were each visited for one or two days.

When the research was completed, a National Review Workshop on the Child Club Study Recommendations was held in Kathmandu. This four-day workshop enabled children and facilitators to hear the research findings and to comment on the recommendations that emerged. Two clubs from each of the SCN and SCUS districts were invited to send two members and two facilitators as representatives. One of the two clubs in each district needed to have participated in the study.

## **Genesis and growth of children's clubs in Nepal**

Archival research and interviews revealed that there have long been children's organisations, most notably the cubs and scouts, which have served the children of Nepal in many important ways since 1952. But the child clubs are different in one very important respect from most children's organisations in all countries: they are managed, in varying degrees, by the children themselves. Not surprisingly, the genesis of what can almost be described as a child club movement coincides with the time when the country was preparing for the national report on the CRC, in 1993 and 1994. SCN, SCUS, Plan International, Action Aid, Child Workers in Nepal and other groups established clubs. By a rough estimate, currently over 30,000 children may be involved in children's clubs nationally. The evaluation reported here limits itself to the clubs supported by SCN and SCUS: whether they are similar to clubs sponsored by other agencies is not known.

The clubs began in different ways but the great majority evolved out of Child-to-Child training programmes in villages. Since the early 1990s, children throughout the SCN-supported districts have been offered training in the Child-to-Child programme, which covers health, hygiene, injury prevention, care for younger children and children's rights. The Child-to-Child programme guidelines suggest that children may want to form a group to continue their work. This has been the case in the formation of some of the clubs. Others have developed independently by diffusion of the concept to neighboring villages. Some have formed in response to a fictional child club that is used in many of the stories told on a child-to-child radio programme. Whereas the child-to-child groups are structured around classes, the child clubs are structured around a forum for meetings and activities.

## **Organisational structure and club membership**

The majority of the child groups have the same structure as adult organisations in their communities. There is an executive board of seven to nine persons, which includes a chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and sometimes a joint secretary. This structure was introduced

to children in the training sessions that they were given by SCN and SCUS and repeated in the advice they received from visiting facilitators. It accords with a "leadership" model with its emphasis on direction being provided by a few talented children with little participation by the majority of the children in decision making.

In spite of the preponderance of this structure, some interesting models have evolved in a number of the clubs. Some children have added committees to their structures like the model shown in Figure 1. Each of the coordinators of the committees in this club are also on the Executive Committee. Our general conclusion is that, while children are capable of creativity in establishing their own organisational structures, there is not yet a great deal of variation. This is because children were only introduced to one kind of structure and they have not been encouraged to challenge it.

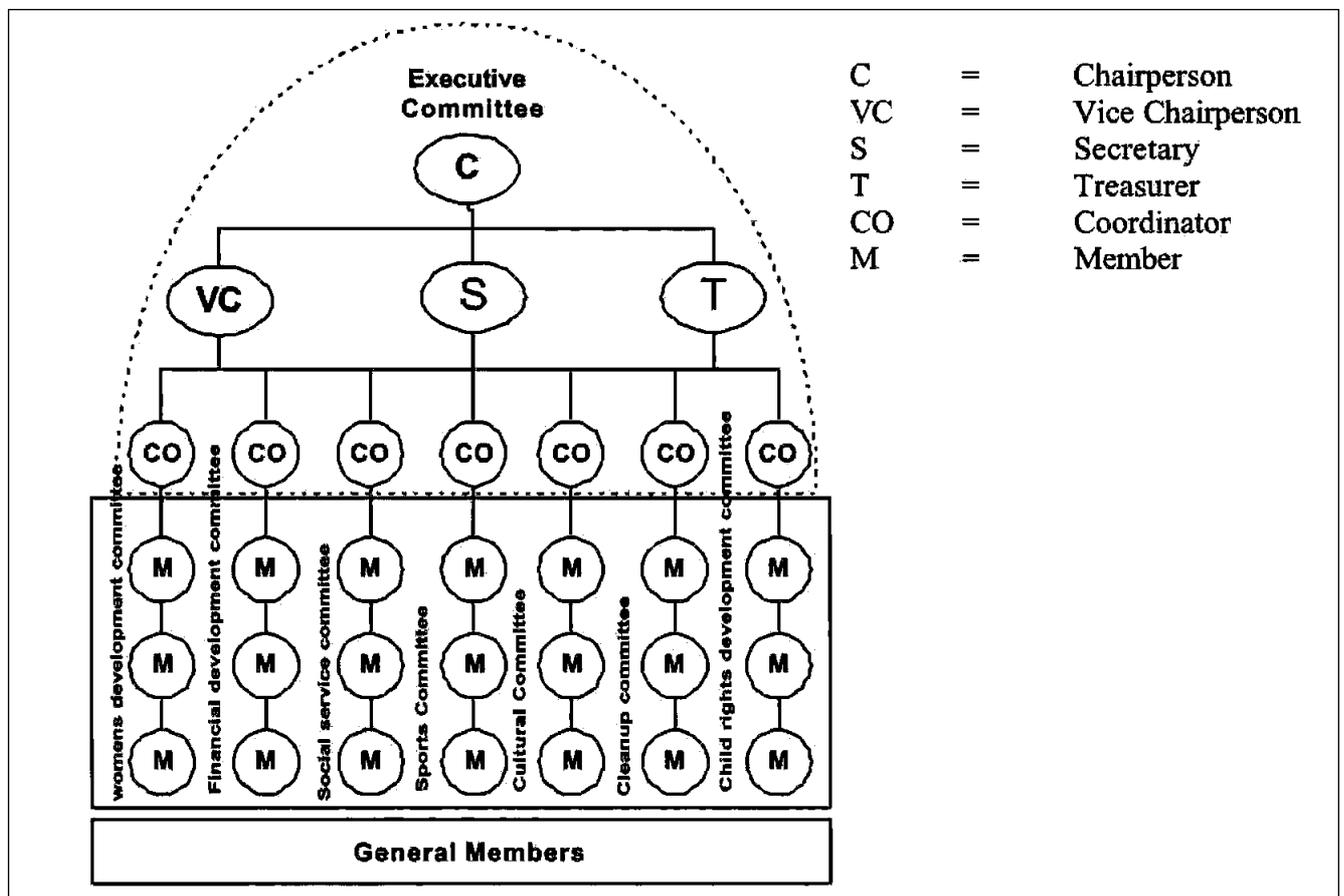
We also sought to understand who attends the clubs, in what capacities, and why some children stay away. The recommended age range for club membership is from 8 to 16. The study showed a modal age of 12, with more children 12 and older than younger than 12. Children over the age of 12 are more highly involved in terms of club meetings and activities, but especially in decision making. Most board members are over 13 years of age, and the selection and planning of activities is also limited

to the older children. Also, with few exceptions, it is the older children who get the opportunity to participate in workshops and training.

In terms of gender, the clubs are remarkably well balanced in comparison to other Nepalese institutions. Nationally, there were a greater number of boys in the clubs than girls, by a margin of 56% to 44% out of a sample of 5005 children. It was also found that slightly more boys than girls attend meetings where decisions are made, whereas similar proportions of boys and girls participate in activities.

The children's mapping of all households in their community with child club members and of all those with no members provides us with our best measure of caste or ethnic exclusion. We conclude that there were no patterns of exclusion based on ethnicity or caste in the child clubs in rural hill areas. In the Terai, there is also generally a representative membership, except for cases where income and caste are correlated. There are many cases of children who are not in the club or who have dropped out who are from low-income and caste groups because they could not pay the monthly club fees. In rural areas as well as urban areas, participation by lower caste and local minority ethnic groups within the executive structure of the clubs is lower. Even when they are a minority, the children of groups that are socially "high ranking" are more highly represented.

Figure 1 Organisational structure of children's club (Adarsha model)



In urban areas, the poorest children and those of minority groups are not well represented because of less information about club opportunities among their families. As a result, two SCN clubs, in Kathmandu and Birgunj, have recently been established to be specifically accessible to children of low-caste populations.

Those who are the most underrepresented are children who experience additional challenges as a result of physical, mental or emotional special needs. None of the 22 case study clubs had any children who were identified as being with special needs. This is unfortunate for these children who are already isolated in their communities, as the clubs offer a unique opportunity to correct this inequality.

In the survey, the reasons that children gave for other children in their community not joining the club were a lack of free time, that their parents did not let them join, and the financial difficulties of families. Our interviews with the non-club-going children and their parents confirmed these reasons, and also revealed that some parents felt that the clubs engaged in relatively frivolous activities like dancing and playing when they felt that their children should either be studying or working to help their family. There was a general feeling that the clubs needed to maintain a high profile of good work for the community if parents were to continue to allow their children to attend.

## Club activities

Meetings form the core of club activities. Most clubs meet on a monthly basis and some bi-monthly. Most of the meeting time, of one to two hours, involves taking attendance, collecting fees, sharing the club's financial situation, going through the agenda and passing decisions. This formal part of the meeting is often followed by an informal part, which involves discussion, song, dance and play. From our large survey we learned that there are a set of activities that almost all clubs engage in: dancing, singing, theatre, development work, play, recreation, sports, and national rallies like Children's Day.

A more revealing survey question was on "activities that you do not get to do anywhere else". We coded the largest category of responses in this chart as "peer relations". Under this category, in order of frequency, are "discussions", "meet and make friends", "share information", "make decisions together" and "work together". To answer a question on activities with such a preponderance of social responses clearly reveals how socially important the clubs are to children. The children also described the clubs as places where they have the chance to participate in celebrations and events such as rallies, contribute to community development, express themselves culturally and artistically, and play.

In the case study clubs, we designed the activity preference method to liberate children to rethink what kinds of activities they would like to do in the clubs. We divided club members into four separate groups of older and younger boys and girls (12 and older or younger than 12). They sat in these groups to identify their favorite current club activity, their favorite out-of-club activity that they would like to do in the club, and a desired club activity that they do not get to do anywhere. They then performed each of these activities as mime skits for everyone to guess. Using the total set of these preferred activities within each club, the four groups of children then voted separately on their preferences. This provides each club with an account of what boys and girls of different ages would like to have as club activity opportunities. The results were also compiled for all of the case study clubs together.



**Children ranking activity preferences using a matrix, Lamjung, Nepal**

## Impacts of the clubs

Although we have no independent measure of the impact of the clubs on children, the qualitative data is overwhelmingly convincing to the authors that the clubs are offering some very new kinds of opportunities for children's personal development. They are learning new skills and gaining knowledge which they cannot learn in other institutions such as school or home. The most commonly heard answer among parents, local facilitators and agency staff regarding the benefits of the club is that the children have gained confidence, especially with strangers.

The children themselves see the opportunity to do things together as a distinctive quality of the clubs. To this we would add that the children are getting real experiences in how to make decisions together, to manage their own organisation and to learn how other organisations function. They are discovering what community development is about by not just doing projects but discussing their plans for these projects. More generally,

they are gaining the habit of managing their relationships in democratic ways from an early age. Some clubs are becoming aware of rights and the violations of rights in the most effective way – by acting on them. When the children voted on the perceived benefits that they gained, girls and boys of both age groups (12 and older, younger than 12) identified clubs as the best place for getting an opportunity to do work, to learn to work with others, to decide what to do and how to do it, to speak publicly with confidence and to learn about child rights.

It is notable that the clubs scored the lowest among different community settings as a place for “getting to laugh”. It could be that the children were responding here in terms of their club meetings rather than the many opportunities most clubs have for games. But our direct observations of those times when children play in the club is that it is usually boys who play and very rarely older girls, for they must go home to work. For them to have the club as a play opportunity, it would probably have to be built into the club time as an event or a competition. Only then might their parents accept such a seemingly frivolous activity.

The samples of parents of club members that we interviewed consistently described the positive impact of the clubs on their children’s studies, self-development, confidence, particularly in speaking, and their learning about environmental conservation. It is notable that the parents did not speak, as the children did, of learning about rights. None of the parents interviewed shared any negative impacts they have seen from the child club on the children, family or community.

Many of the activities the clubs are involved in are designed to benefit the community: such as reforestation, beautifying community areas with flower gardens and cleaning water tanks. Unfortunately our discussions with

general adult members of the communities show that while they see benefits to children, there is a common lack of recognition of such community benefits. Perhaps this is partly because the projects are rarely truly designed by the children. Consequently they may be seen as community projects which the children also get involved in, and hence they do not have any clear identity as child club projects.

The clubs also act as awareness-raising groups on children’s rights and pressure groups on community and environmental issues. Given that the degree of independent identification of projects by children was found to be low, this awareness raising is an area of potential manipulation of children by adults. Examples we have seen where children engage in some action themselves, which in turn leads adults to act, would seem to be much safer for the future of children’s clubs than rallies where children carry out awareness-raising agendas designed by one group of adults for another. For example, when children fixed the water pipes in Jhadewa, Palpa, which had been cut by individuals to intercept water, this was a genuinely positive action by the children themselves, which then embarrassed the adults into action. Even better examples are when children identify and analyse a situation that is central to their own lives. For example, in one community a schoolteacher was spitting in class. The children discussed this in their club and decided to talk to the Principal so that he would stop what they considered to be disgusting behaviour. This may seem like a small issue but it is truly in the spirit intended by the drafters of the CRC when they wrote about children having a voice in matters that concern them.

We have evaluated here only the short-term impacts of the clubs. Their greater effect is likely to be in the long term. For the clubs are fostering ways of thinking and working together which are likely to continue after children leave the clubs. We would need to return in ten years’ time to properly assess their impact. One cannot help but feel that the clubs bring such changes in children’s social relationships and opportunities to act and reflect that they will have far-reaching consequences. While children demonstrate remarkable competencies in collaborative agricultural work with their families, this has not in the past extended to community decision making or to the creation of projects which they themselves initiate. The experience of working with others from an early age on community issues goes well beyond what children have traditionally done in work with their families.



**Organisation charts, Sakine, Nepal**

Families will no doubt gradually come to recognize children as capable of being more fully participating members of their communities. Given the knowledge that they gain on health, environment and childcare, the children will also be able to better their livelihoods and their communities. In addition, their experience in being active citizens will hopefully result in their continued active roles in civil society. Their knowledge and skills in democratic decision making as well as working with individuals of different genders, ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds should all contribute to the making of more democratic and inclusive communities.

Our greatest concern is that, although the clubs are remarkably inclusive, there are still some patterns of exclusion. Because those who are excluded are the poorest non-school-going children or disabled children, these children's marginalisation will be furthered by the clubs if a concentrated effort is not made to include them.

## Recommendations

To increase the positive effects of the clubs, numerous recommendations were made and discussed at a National Review Workshop on the Child Club Study Recommendation, held in Kathmandu in 1999. Some of these recommendations came from the children themselves, from the national survey, interviews and discussions. Others were based on interviews with facilitators and programme staff and on the authors' own observations. These recommendations are presented in detail in the report referenced below.

A concluding remark is that one of our goals in conducting this research was to experiment with methods that could be used by the clubs independently to monitor their ongoing functioning. If the clubs are to be self-managing institutions, they need to be self-monitoring ones. Children's voices that are not normally heard, and many issues that are not normally discussed, emerge through this monitoring process. A number of the methods we used were extremely effective in stimulating discussions, which rapidly broadened the awareness of club members. For example, the comparative benefits and the comparative activity preference methods got children of different ages and genders talking for the first time about how well the club served their particular subgroup's needs. Opportunities for reflection through methods of this kind need to become a regular part of the clubs' functioning. These methods are fully described in the video *Mirrors of Ourselves*, which employs video from the Nepal research together with animation. The methods it shows can be modified by groups of young people or group facilitators in any country to improve their democratic functioning.

**Jasmine Rajbhandary, Advocacy Support Unit,  
Save the Children U.K., Jawalaknel, Lalitpur,  
GPO Box 992, Kathmandu, Nepal  
j.rajbhandary@sc-uk.org.np**

**Roger Hart, Children's Environments Research Group,  
Graduate Center of the City University of New York,  
365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 11016-4039, U.S.A.  
RHart@gc.cuny.edu**

**Chandrika Khatiwada, Save the Children Norway,  
Jawalaknel, Lalitpur, GPO Box 3394,  
Kathmandu, Nepal  
c.khatiwada@savechildren-norway.org.np**

## Note

The full report on which this article is based, *The Children's Clubs of Nepal: a democratic experiment*, and the video *Mirrors of Ourselves* can be obtained from either of the following:

Save the Children Alliance, Box 3394, Jawalaknel,  
Kathmandu, Nepal.  
Email: [post@savechildren-norway.org.np](mailto:post@savechildren-norway.org.np)

Children's Environments Research Group,  
Graduate Center of the City University of New York,  
365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4309, USA  
Internet: [www.cerg1.org](http://www.cerg1.org)

Photographs and diagram extracted from the full report.

## Reference

Rajbhandary, J., Hart, R., and Khatiwada, C. 1999. *The Children's Clubs of Nepal: a democratic experiment*. Save the Children US/Save the Children Norway.