

Young children as actors in their own development

The Committee of the Convention on the Rights of the Child held a general discussion in Geneva on 17 September devoted to the topic 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood' (for more information about the event see page 58). The Bernard van Leer Foundation was involved in the organisation of the event, and it invited four of its counterparts to join in the meeting. Beforehand, the Foundation asked the counterparts to reply to a questionnaire to reflect on a meeting workshop on the subject 'Young children as actors in their own development'. Edited summaries of the replies are presented below.

Children's participation: myth or reality? Caribbean perspectives

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The Caribbean countries have all signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Enshrined in this document is the notion of the right of children to participate in decisions affecting their lives. In introducing this concept of participation, the Convention advances the agenda for children from welfare to rights. It does so by advocating the right to express opinions and to be heard, the right to freedom of expression and to gain access to information and the right to freedom of association.

The realisation of these rights of the child requires a fundamental and radical change in the way in which the 'child' is defined and treated in Caribbean cultures. It requires us to replace the classical image of children as incapable, passive and dependent and to elevate children to the status of social actors and subjects of rights. In the Caribbean, this means that the concept of the child must be reframed. Children must no longer be considered the property of their parents and silent objects of adult benevolence, guidance or control. They must be allowed a critical voice in their own development.

This has not proved to be easy in any country, and, within the climate of opinion that prevails in many families, communities and societies, it appears to strike at the very root of social order and stability. Such a mandate therefore tends to be viewed with concern, suspicion or fear.

A small window of change is evident in the strategies and modalities for children's participation in some countries. These have often taken the form of youth parliaments, children's elections, youth summits, youth councils, youth affairs departments, life-skills training programmes for young people and committees at conferences. In general, however, participation in these forums and activities is limited to adolescents, mainly late teenagers, and is often only symbolic. Moreover, the impact of these one-off events, though critical in putting across the message of children's participation, tend to be temporary.

There is also only minimal emphasis at the level of governments and families on early childhood development, and, where it exists, the emphasis is on custodial care or preparation for formal schooling. There seems to be little appreciation of the importance of play, stimulation and creativity, or, indeed, social interaction and communication. While there is evidence of change in some Caribbean countries, those centres that provide more than custodial and academic programmes are usually privately run and are therefore fee-paying and beyond the means of the majority of the population.

There is therefore a need for Caribbean countries to institutionalise children's participation systematically and sustainably and to move the message and the mandate more directly into schools, families and communities.

Poverty and socio-cultural variables

Within the Caribbean, there is widespread ignorance of the stages of the psychological and intellectual development of the child. Traditional local beliefs and myths often fill the gap. Central to this belief system is the image of the young child as an innocent, incapable minor, dependent on adults. Inappropriate perceptions and poor treatment of children are reinforced by the increasing stress experienced by parents and other adults. Recent research has identified parental stress and frustration as correlates of child silencing and non-participation. The reliance on corporal punishment as the favoured disciplinary method is a related variable. A persistent pattern indicates that even very young children are being beaten into conformity.

Parental stress is linked to conditions such as poverty. Mothers who, as single parents, assume the double burden of employment and childcare have been identified as the individuals most susceptible to stress. In those countries experiencing unemployment and economic crises, there is the added problem of adult emigration and the consequent fragmentation of extended family support networks and the growing prevalence of lone parenting. The notion that 'it takes a village to raise a child', adopted from Africa and traditional in Caribbean communities, is unlikely to be realised in current circumstances.

The right to the participation of young children in India: reality or rhetoric?

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Integrated Child Development Services was launched in 1975 to provide services for the development of the child and improve health, nutrition and education in each target community. The direct beneficiaries are children under 6. The focal point for service delivery is the *anganwadi* (childcare centre) in the village or slum. An *anganwadi* worker and helper run each centre. The focus is on physical, motor, psychosocial and cognitive development in an organised environment. There are 30,639 such *anganwadis* in Tamil Nadu.

Example of the participation of young children

The Government of Tamil Nadu introduced potatoes and chickpeas instead of an egg per child per week

Also connected to poverty, unemployment and migration are the rising crime and delinquency rates, especially within urban neighbourhoods. Declining community spirit makes the local environment unsafe for children and constrains their participation in play and other activities beyond the narrow confines of home and yard.

There is, in the life-cycle of childhood in the Caribbean, a sharp transition from the permissiveness and leniency of early infancy to the discipline that is enforced by age 4 or 5. From then on, a good child is essentially one that is well behaved, mannerly and obedient, 'seen and not heard'. This conception results in added pressure to strengthen discipline and control rather than provide space and freedom for child participation.

Conclusion

In the Caribbean, young children remain invisible and voiceless even in their own families. The culture of children's participation must filter through from official ceremony into schools, homes and communities and be reshaped from decorative symbolism to meaningful involvement. Interventions must move beyond the social-institutional environment of childhood to challenge the underlying ideological and cultural myths and beliefs that have created outdated images of the innate make-up, capacity and character of the child.

as the supplementary nutrition in the *anganwadi*. The young children in the *anganwadis* were consulted about the change and mostly said they preferred the egg. There was an extensive campaign, and the government reintroduced the egg.

The *anganwadi* worker often designs her daily teaching based on the preferences mentioned by the children. Otherwise, the children start engaging in their own activities. Irrespective of the *anganwadi* worker's plan, when the children request a particular activity like singing, or a frog race, or an elephant's story, then the *anganwadi* worker follows their choice and carries out that activity. Hence, the children learn by choice and not by force.



Courtesy FORCES

In the anganwadis, sharing occurs especially in two areas: 'what the child likes the most' and 'what the child does not like at all'. To ensure participation, the anganwadi workers may ask questions such as "What do you want to see?", "Whom do you want to meet?" and "What will you ask them?". Children are usually direct in giving their opinions.

Level of participation

In general, a certain level of children's participation takes place, but there is still a lack of understanding and acceptance about the right of children to influence their own development. There are several reasons for this.

In Indian culture, an ideal child is one who sits quietly, and an ideal teacher is one who has children who sit quietly. 'Inactive' is assumed to be the way a child should be. Most anganwadi workers did not themselves experience true participation as pupils. When they were in school, they sat, they listened, and then they recited whatever the teacher had said.

Many anganwadi workers value authoritative discipline, including physical punishment and the rod. Some anganwadi workers fear that children's participation may lead to change and disruption. The anganwadi workers mentioned their chief problems as low salaries, heavy workloads, the duty to pick up children from their homes, and the lack of basic amenities. The ratio of children to anganwadi worker in some anganwadis is 40 to 1. It is very difficult to give individual attention. The scope of the activities of the anganwadi workers is limited by the rules and regulations imposed by the system. The workers have little room to express their creativity.

According to the Indian tradition of discipline, children in the anganwadis are not encouraged to interact with their peers. Talking with peers may even be punished. The socio-economic situation is not the same among the children. Some families face extreme poverty, and this creates many problems.

New perspectives on early childhood education

Participation in early childhood education can enable children to give voice to descriptions of the pre-school activities they have experienced, their own efforts to challenge the experience and the impact of adult efforts to help them. It can ensure that the views and concerns of those most directly affected are heard. It can help challenge the key barriers that children face in anganwadis. It can ensure that more appropriate, relevant and sustainable programmes and therefore programmes more likely to succeed are implemented. When children are asked about 'what matters to them', they will often highlight issues that adults do not necessarily prioritise or see as a major concern.

Participation enhances self-confidence and self-esteem. Children benefit from participation by acquiring and expanding their skills, by meeting other children and understanding that others share the same or similar experiences, and that they are not alone. They develop a group perspective. Participation gives children a sense of purpose and competence and a belief that they can have a positive impact on their own lives and influence and change the lives of others, especially their peers and their families. Children's involvement will bring numerous benefits, including new insights, improved understanding and more appropriate recommendations. It does this by bringing us closer to their daily lives.

Ensuring meaningful participation

The establishment of a safe and meaningful environment for the participation of children in anganwadis and one which minimises the risk to children from their involvement will not happen by accident. Certain preconditions must be met to help create the right environment.

What constitutes quality children's participation? Is it easy to recognise genuine participation (authentic,

voluntary, autonomous, spontaneous) and distinguish from counterfeit or pseudo-participation induced or coerced participation? Participation is a qualitative process leading to qualitative change. Is it possible to measure qualitative change? In child development, change has many dimensions, and various factors are at work. How can we say the change is due only to participation?

In India, to realise the right of young children to participate, the following steps should be taken.

1. The anganwadi worker should be sensitised to work with children and be assisted to become more responsive to the context in which children live.
2. Integrated Child Development Services should be made more flexible.

3. The individual needs of a child should be borne in mind.
4. Children should be trusted and encouraged to do whatever they can do themselves.
5. The space should be appropriate to encourage participation.
6. The anganwadi workers are given three months pre-school training upon recruitment; methods to elicit child participation and create a child-friendly environment should be part of the training module.
7. The terms and conditions of the service of the anganwadi workers should be sufficiently generous; a frustrated anganwadi worker can communicate negative emotions, and this may adversely affect the child.

Children's rights and community-based care for young children in South Africa

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Sadly, among most adults the issue of children's rights appears to leave an unpleasant feeling. In rural communities, one can speak openly only about meeting the needs of children. Although we know children rely on adult guidance, some adults lack an understanding of basic, simple solutions to needs. We have learned from discussions with caregivers that it is taboo to interact with children. Decisions are often made without owning up to the after-effects of the laws and rules making vulnerable children more destitute and distressed. Because of budget constraints, children's problems are often spoken about, but not addressed.

Sometimes, the negative view of rights seems to stem from our failure to demystify rights, responsibilities and roles. When one listens creatively to children, one can gather a sense of their opinions without compromising respect, caring and responsibility. It remains our duty to ensure that basic needs are linked with basic human rights. Children depend on adults to ensure that their rights are respected. Children need these rights protected because of who they are. Children are not workers who can help feed families. Children are not means of obtaining poverty benefits or pensions. Children are not pawns for determining who deserves more assets in a divorce settlement. Children must not and should never be shields in war.

A vision for child and family support centres

There is a workable, cost-effective solution to meeting the challenges facing young children growing up in impoverished circumstances and confronting the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This involves the use of the existing network of community-based early childhood development sites (crèches, day-care centres, pre-schools) to ensure that every young child has free and easy access to a safe, caring and stimulating learning environment during the day. After-school care would also have to be provided to those young children who finish formal schooling early and who are often then unsupervised and therefore vulnerable to neglect and abuse. These early childhood development sites would be administered by community committees, with the cooperation of traditional, elected and community leaders.

Government departments would have to provide integrated and intersectoral services. The Department of Social Development should take overall responsibility. The sites would have to be registered and subsidised to ensure that minimum standards are met and that the sites are sustainable. The Department of Health should provide nutrition programmes. They would then be in a position to monitor the status of the children's nutrition, health, growth and immunisations, as well as the integration of children with special needs. The Department



Photo: BvLF / Tanja van de Linde
It remains the duty of adults to ensure that young children's rights are respected

of Education should monitor the quality of the sites, as well as the after-school care and recreation programmes. The Department of Agriculture must guarantee that each site has a food garden to sustain food security.

Local governments would take responsibility for the provision of buildings and basic services as an integral part of their integrated development plans. The Kwa-Zulu Natal Provincial Programme of Action for Children, through the establishment of local programmes of action, would play a monitoring and coordinating role.

Community, youth and women's groups and faith-based organisations could play a vital role in the provision of support. Non-governmental and community-based organisations could supply training, capacity-building, support and monitoring. The focus would be on the development of the capacity

of parents, caregivers, stakeholders and community leaders and ensuring the resources necessary to secure the basic welfare of young children.

In this way, two main groups of caregivers – the elderly and children who are unable to attend school because of their responsibility for younger siblings – would be released, confident in the knowledge that young children are being properly cared for in a stimulating environment during the day.

If the government were to provide free access to community-based child and family support centres within easy reach of children's homes, this would go a long way towards addressing most of the serious problems facing young children, especially orphans and vulnerable children in impoverished circumstances.

Venezuela: A methodology for community pre-school care

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In 1984–88, the Centros Comunitarios de Aprendizaje – CECODAP (Community Centres for Learning) a non-governmental organisation in Venezuela, developed an innovative approach to pre-school care involving the participation of families and the community. The approach evolved into the Methodology for Community Pre-School Care. The children participated in the programme within a community centre where they interacted with members of their own families, who were responsible for the centre's activities. Though it was certainly not the explicit intention at the outset to offer the children a space to express themselves, share their views and take decisions, the centres naturally allowed the children to come into meaningful contact with their communities, deepen their understanding of the context in which they were living, exchange experiences with other children and put into practice strategies to settle on the routine aspects of the activities in which they were involved.

Following the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by Venezuela in 1990 and the application of the Ley Orgánica para la Protección del Niño and del Adolescente (Law for the Protection of the Child and the Adolescent) in 2000, the role of children changed drastically to the extent that they were no longer *objects* of protection, but *subjects* of rights. This reality led the Community Centres for Learning to design, implement and replicate the programme Derechos a Mi Medida ('rights that are my size') to promote and defend the rights of 0–8-year olds.

A methodology directed towards teachers, families and communities was designed and implemented expressly for the participation of children and adolescents considered as citizens not only within the centres, but also in community mobilisation efforts.

During the troubled process of political and constitutional change that the country experienced beginning in 1999, and in celebration of the Semana Nacional de los Derechos del Niño (National Child's Rights Week), the Marcha de los Arcoiris (March of

the Rainbows) was organised with the participation of around 1,000 children. The theme of the march was: 'We want a law that reflects and does not obscure the Convention on the Rights of the Child'. Through games and dramatic presentations, the children publicised the rights they thought needed to be protected so that they could live equitably within their families and communities.

The troubled environment of political polarisation and high level of social conflict in the country were the motivation behind the implementation of the programme El Buen Trato Entra por Casa ('good treatment begins at home'). This initiative relied on children as actors in the resolution of everyday conflicts. Children were asked their opinions; they were encouraged to express their emotions and participate in negotiations among their families and teachers in order to establish guidelines for participation that would be more democratic.

Young children's participation: reality or fiction?

Clearly, there is resistance to the idea that small children might participate effectively in giving substance to their own rights or in making decisions. This is because one underestimates or overestimates the capacities and abilities of very young children. Many are ignorant of the process of children's development, while the power that adults can exercise over children is very great.

This is contradictory. On the one hand, children are stimulated from their earliest years through the application of special techniques to develop their motor, cognitive and social abilities. On the other hand, they are not allowed to use all these abilities to play a more active role in their homes or early education centres. When we say 'active', we mean that children can participate by sharing their opinions, expressing their emotions and taking part in decision-making.

To make this approach more consistent will require a change in concept. One must accept that children are citizens and that their abilities and capacities should be exercised progressively, in line with each child's level of development. Adults must recognise

and accept their doubts, their resistance to change and the emotions that hinder their acceptance of children as citizens with rights, and seek to alter educational practice in order to render the relationship between adults and children more democratic. It is a process that will not bear fruit overnight.

It is certainly important that children should exercise their duties of citizenship progressively through participation in all those situations that affect them. When children understand that they are part of the problem unless they are part of the solution, that democracy is built upon the participation of everyone, that, through the expression of their opinions, they can generate change in their surroundings, and that they are viewed by adults as individuals and not merely as objects of protection or of assistance, then there will be a culture of rights that will allow children to become protagonists in their efforts to be taken into account and exercise progressively their duties of citizenship.

The challenges of a meaningful children's participation

In the programmes that we are currently implementing, we consider it essential that the family be involved. We have learned that, when small children, through participation in community programmes, become more dynamic, more demanding individuals, who ask questions because adults listen; and who express their opinions because adults allow them to, then problems may arise when the children return to their homes, and their families do not know how to respond to their demands or deal with their opinions. It is thus important to sensitise adults so that they are prepared for a new relationship with their children and so the potential conflicts can be minimised. It is necessary to understand that there is a tension between the legitimate right of children to participate and the obligation, equally legitimate, of adults to protect children. Not all that children demand or desire is appropriate. Adults must protect children, while guiding them and helping them to deal with frustrations and other strong emotions.

Children should not be idealised as angelic beings, uncontaminated by all the shortcomings and errors that affect adults. Indeed, we know very well that

even very small children carry out activities more fitting for adults. They work on the streets, in the fields and ports, handling tools such as knives and axes. Like adults, they may adopt manipulative and violent behaviour in order to survive.

Early years and participation

We cannot expect the same level of participation from a child of 2, 4, or 8 years of age. Moreover, we must seek to understand the cultural environment of the child, its physical surroundings, its particular capacities and abilities so that we do not require the child to act beyond its stage of development. This means that there must be an effort at sensitisation among teachers, family members and community and programme agents and other individuals active among children.

Quality in young children's participation

For CECODAP, the surest indicators of the 'quality' of children's participation are revealed through the attitudes that the children adopt when they are participating in the resolution of conflicts, in living side by side and interacting with other children and with adults, in decision-making, in the freedom they feel to express their opinions, and in the spontaneity they show when they declare their points of view. If children seem oppressed, fearful, tense and anxious when they are participating, then we can consider this a reflection of a certain negative background against which they are exercising their duties and rights of citizenship.

Criteria for the evaluation of children's participation in programming

The criteria described below are intended to help create and establish tools to measure the effectiveness, benefits and outcomes of various aspects of young children's participation in development programmes, especially programmes oriented towards children. They were developed as part of a contribution to the Bernard van Leer Foundation's 'learning agenda' in response to a need – identified by the Foundation's Latin America desk in 2003 – for a framework to improve understanding of children's participation and use that knowledge to inform programme development. Ideas for the criteria emerged from a meeting between the Foundation and its Latin American counterparts in Chiapas, Mexico, in February 2004, and were subsequently fleshed out in a small workshop in Beberibe (Ceará), Brazil with the input of Foundation staff, counterparts from Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela, and Gerison Lansdown, an external expert in the field. Although elaborated with Latin American counterparts, they were conceptualised to have an international perspective.

The premise behind 'children's participation' is that children are more than receptacles of learning, passive recipients of adult protection, or human beings not yet fully formed. Children are agents of change in their own lives, the lives of their families and the life of society, entitled to be listened to and taken seriously in decisions and actions that affect them. However, for this right to become a reality, adults need to learn to listen to children and create spaces in which children are enabled to contribute meaningfully as individuals.

While the anecdotal evidence of the benefits of children's participation in programmes is now considerable, there has been, to date, relatively little sustained or independent research into its characteristics and impacts. Children's participation only really began to be widely explored in the early 1990s, and understanding is still in a stage of relative infancy. However, there is now increasing examination of the nature of the minimum standards that might be established to ensure that participation is a significant, affirmative experience for children, and the methods that can be employed in assessing the potential of participation to improve programme outcomes.

There are significant challenges to creating and applying coherent and sensitive indicators and precise measurement tools for young children's participation. For example, it is difficult to construct universally applicable indicators for diverse programmes in different cultures and social and economic contexts. The components of the success or failures of programmes vary widely and can almost always be evaluated only through a mix of quantitative and qualitative tools. Many outcomes of participation can be captured only over the long term, after the effects of the programmes have become more evident as children grow and change. Finally, many staff working with young children lack training and knowledge of the range of innovative tools that have been developed to conduct meaningful dialogue with very young children in order to access their views on their participation in programmes. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. It is important to explore new frameworks for evaluating participation, pilot these frameworks, share them, and adapt and amend them. It is necessarily a learning process.

Certainly, there is a powerful case for developing context-sensitive 'criteria' for the creation of indicators with which to measure the effectiveness