

Children’s agency and participation – its relevance for development, peace, and human rights: *reflections on practice from diverse contexts.*

Claire O’Kane

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Summary:

Drawing upon both the human development and the human rights paradigm this paper emphasises the relevance of children's agency and active participation to development, peace and human rights. Reflections on practice enable identification of some of the implications, processes, ethics, and outcomes of rights based approaches to engaging with children and young people as social actors and rights holders. The final part of paper outlines opportunities to increase children's participation and agency, and introduces a framework to monitor and evaluate children’s participation, so that children’s contributions as active citizens to development, peace and human rights can be increasingly recognised and supported.

Introduction:

From the youngest age children communicate with people around them. Girls and boys participate in and contribute to their families, schools, communities and societies in a wide variety of ways. However, children’s contributions are often under-recognised and under-valued. In many cultures around the world, children’s voices continue to be marginalised. Unequal power relations between children and adults leave children more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, particularly in situations characterised by conflict, post conflict or natural disaster. In some socio-cultural contexts discrimination based on gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, religion, HIV and other factors further contributes to the exclusion of certain groups of children, and to increased marginalisation of their voices. Thus, increased efforts are needed to recognise children’s agency and to increase space for their active participation, especially of the most marginalised.

Recognising human beings as social actors and encouraging their active participation is integral to both human development and human rights paradigms. The Human Development Paradigm, rooted on Sen’s Capability Approach aims to expand people’s freedoms - *the capabilities they have reason to value* - and empower people to actively engage in development processes¹. The Paradigm helps decision makers to choose proper policies on the basis of principles such as justice, equality, human rights, and sustainability.² The human rights framework recognizes people as right holders who should be empowered to participate in decisions affecting them, to claim their rights and to hold duty bearers accountable. This framework reaffirms the indivisibility, universality, inalienability, interdependence and non discrimination of civil, political, economical, social and cultural rights. However, it is only in the past 20 years that children under the age of 18 years have been recognised and valued as social actors and right holders. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) promulgated children’s rights to participation, alongside their

¹ Sen, 1999.

² Alkire, 2010, p.39

rights to survival, protection and development. Furthermore, children’s participation is recognised as one of the key principles of the CRC. Children’s participation is identified as both a means to achieve other rights, and as a right to be fulfilled in its own right.

The 1995 World Summit on Social Development emphasised the need to foster '*societies that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, and on non-discrimination, equality of opportunity... and participation of all*'. As a response, Save the Children produced a policy document '*Towards a Children's Agenda*', recognising children's participation as a new challenge for social development. The document emphasised the importance of placing children’s needs, interests, rights and perspectives at the centre of social and economic policy, alongside and equal to those of adults. In more recent years, Save the Children has also been advocating for and supporting children’s participation in peace, reconciliation and reconstruction processes so that children and young people may more meaningfully contribute to efforts to identify, address and monitor the structural factors which inhibit peace and the fulfilment of children’s rights³.

Recognising children’s agency has also been reinforced by the establishment of a relatively new paradigm for the study of childhood which recognises the social construction and diversity of childhoods⁴. The emergence of the paradigm, in part reflects a move away from seeing children as passive recipients of adult socialisation, to recognition that children are social actors in their own right. Alongside adults, children are active participants in the construction and determination of their experiences, other people’s lives, and the societies in which they live. The diversity of childhoods is also recognised as childhoods are influenced by gender, family economy, culture, ethnicity, geography, sibling order and other factors.

The recognition of children as active participants in society had a profound impact on organisations working to improve children’s welfare and rights. Agencies began to question their own assumptions about children and to take children’s views seriously. Researching children’s competencies and their social and economic contributions opened new perspectives on children and their roles in society⁵. The Capability Approach has been adapted and used both as a framework of thought and a normative tool in analysing children’s well-being and poverty⁶. Children, including working children and street children, have been meaningfully involved in defining their capabilities to inform relevant dimensions of children’s well-being⁷. Biggeri (2004) emphasises how the capability approach can offer other relevant perspectives in the analysis of well-being especially in gender and time dimensions which can influence practice and policy developments, for example concerning child work.

Increasing numbers of child welfare organisations have adopted a rights based approach to their work, empowering children to claim their rights, to challenge different forms of discrimination, and to strengthen mechanisms which hold duty bearers accountable for children’s rights⁸. Rights-based approaches shift the concept of participation in development

³ Save the Children Norway 2008; Feinstein et al; 2009; O’Kane et al, 2009

⁴ James and Prout, 1990; 1997

⁵ Theis and O’Kane, 2005

⁶ Biggeri, 2004

⁷ Biggeri et al 2006, 2009

⁸ See Theis and O’Kane, 2005; O’Kane, 2003; Inter-agency Working Group on Children’s Participation, 2008

from emphasising the ‘beneficiaries’ involvement in creating better programmes to approaches that stress people’s rights to citizenship and democratic governance.

Reflections on practice:

Practical experiences of working with local NGOs and with Save the Children in the past decade in Afghanistan, Uganda, Burma, Nepal, India, and Bangladesh are drawn upon in this paper, thus illustrating the possibility of promoting and supporting children’s participation and agency in diverse contexts, some of which are characterised by conflict, instability or fragility.

Reflections on practice enable identification of some of the implications, processes, methods, ethics, and outcomes of rights based approaches to engaging with children and young people as social actors and rights holders. Key themes to be explored encompassing ‘*implications, process and methods*’ include:

- *Valuing children and childhood diversity*
- *Encouraging children’s expression from the early years and empowering children with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to assert their rights*
- *Organisational human resource development and flexible policies*
- *Creating opportunities for children’s meaningful involvement in all stages of programming*
- *Encouraging inclusion and non-discriminatory practice*
- *The power of the collective – empowering children to claim their rights*
- *Institutionalising space for children’s representation in governance structures and relevant decision making processes*

Ethical practice is integral to effective child rights practice and meaningful children’s participation. In all contexts power relations between adults and children, and among children need to be understood, if we are to reach out, engage with and empower children, particularly the most marginalised. The risks of encouraging children to express their views, to organise themselves, and to be heard need to be identified in each socio-cultural political context, so that strategies can be developed and acted upon to reduce risks, and to ensure that children’s participation is in their best interests. Basic requirements in children’s participation which help guide ethical, inclusive and safe practice will be outlined later in the paper.

Valuing children and childhood diversity:

Supporting children’s participation cannot simply be a tick box activity by any organisation, as it involves ‘*transforming the power relations between adults and children... a long, gradual process of changing adult attitudes, behaviour, institutional practices...*’ (O’Kane, 2003b, p,3). A fundamental change is often required, including the manner in which staff from UN, NGO and Government agencies perceive and value children. Rather than assuming that we as adults know best due to our age, experience and studies; adults need to be open-minded, demonstrating their willingness to listen to, and to learn with and from children from diverse backgrounds. We need to value girls and boys, especially the most marginalised, recognising their capabilities and competencies, understanding their experiences and insights, so that we can work collaboratively to develop programmes and policies in their best interests to increase fulfilment of their rights.

In working with girls and boys (especially the most marginalised) in ways that demonstrate our value for their personhood and competencies we can also be mentors to parents, caregivers, teachers, police, government officials and other duty bearers demonstrating respectful ways to engage with girls and boys.

In socio-cultural contexts that are characterised by values and respect for elders and/or patriarchy, fears may be expressed about the dangers of ‘empowering children’. In cultures where children (especially girls) are expected to do what adults tell them, not to raise their voice or ask questions, adults are often reluctant to support children’s participation, and often express fears that children will become disrespectful and undisciplined. However, interestingly, working with girls and boys in traditional societies such as Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, encouraging children to communicate with adults in respectful ways, has increased rather than decreased their discipline and their respect for adults. Moreover, adults respect for girls and boys has increased:

Before being part of the Child Club we were undisciplined... However, since being part of the Child Clubs we have been very able to explain to our parents ‘we are going here for this Child Club activity’. They have supported us, as our behaviour has been good. We have also changed many things in schools from negative to positive and our parents are very happy.... The relationship between parents – children – teachers has also improved. We have gained so much knowledge and our current and future life is brighter. (boy, member of Child Club, Nepal)

Since having their own Child Groups we have observed quite a number of changes in children’s behaviour, thinking and their knowledge. Now they know more, they are better behaved and they listen to adults more (female Child Protection Group member, Mawlamyaing, Burma)

The importance of working with children in their local context to enable their parents, teachers and religious elders to articulate and internalize the benefits of children’s participation vis-à-vis their own value system and cultural practices should be encouraged⁹; and ‘win win’ ways of respectful, effective communication by children with adults should be supported, so that adults fears are allayed.

Encouraging children’s expression from the early years and empowering children with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to claim their rights:

From the earliest years babies and toddlers can be encouraged to express themselves, to communicate and to strengthen their competencies to influence decisions affecting them¹⁰. A life cycle approach encourages us to approach girls and boys at different ages, building upon their strengths and their abilities to participate. Developing the capacity of girls and boys to access information, to strengthen their life skills, to assert their rights in respectful ways, and to build partnerships with key adult duty bearers are integral to a child rights based approach. As acknowledged by Alkire (2010) ‘*The very language and thought process of human rights can be empowering. It can give people a way to voice their grievances and seek justice, and to challenge and reverse abuses of power*’ (p.58) To transform traditional power relations between adults and children, duty bearers at different levels (family, community, school, work place, society) need to be identified, and concerned adults need to be

⁹ see O’Kane, 2007; Theis and O’Kane, 2005

¹⁰ See Lansdown, G. (2005) Can you hear me? The right of young children to participate in decisions affecting them. Bernard Van Leer Foundation

prepared to listen to children and young people, to appreciate the benefits of collaborating with children to improve realisation of their rights.

Case Example: *In Afghanistan, from 2003 - 2004 Save the Children supported boys and girls to form their own groups, and they supported capacity building initiatives on: child rights, life skills, theater for development, radio production skills, and tools for self assessment and planning of their groups. Partnerships between children’s groups and local radio stations have enabled weekly radio productions by both working children and school-going children’s groups in two locations. The children’s groups undertook some successful community mobilization and advocacy initiatives with adults in their local schools and communities, including: establishing libraries in their schools; action to stop beating by teachers; gaining clean water in their schools; preventing early child marriage, preventing police violence; and enabling child workers to go to school. In addressing violence in schools the Children’s Group in Mazar e Sharif explained how the children had visited the school department to explain the problem of teachers beating children. The school principle supported the children to organise a meeting with the teachers. The Child Group members also monitored the response by asking children if they have been beaten. Within six months the Child Group had been effective in stopping most beating in the schools.*

Children and young people often choose creative and traditional cultural ways to communicate their advocacy messages and to mobilise communities on child rights issues affecting them, including dance, drama, songs, and media initiatives (TV, radio, wall newspapers etc). Creative communication and children’s media initiatives should be encouraged as they can be empowering and effective in influencing wider attitudinal and behaviour change.

Case example: Children’s participation in radio shows, Gulu district, Uganda¹¹: *At the district level, members of Children’s Peace Clubs and associations participated in various children’s radio programmes to sensitise people about child rights, as well as about what children are doing to resolve conflict and promote peace at the district level. Children’s radio productions generated great interest among adults and young people listening to radio. Opportunities for ‘phone in’ responses from listeners created increased dialogue on significant issues relating to children’s participation in peace processes. For example, one regular adult listener commented “Whoever thought of making children discuss major issues concerning them on radio should be blessed by God. During the twenty-one years, children and their parents in this part of the country had lost hope and confidence. We thought the future was bleak. But if there is still a handful of children who can articulate issues eloquently like those ones, then the Acholi tribe still have something to be proud of. I’m proud — we still have children who can still do great things for their families in the future. I already see future Members of Parliament among them.”*

Organisational human resource development and flexible policies:

Children’s participation has significant implications for organisational policies and human resource development. Children’s participation challenges agency hierarchies and exposes gaps in transparency and in organisational processes that are inimical to children’s involvement¹². For field staff to empower children, they themselves need to be empowered in their own agencies, if they are to be able to create space for children to meaningfully influence organisational strategies, plans and programmes.

¹¹ See Save the Children Norway, 2008

¹² see Theis and O’Kane, 2005

Organisations need to build the capacity of staff to facilitate meaningful, safe and inclusive children’s participation. Staff need to strengthen their knowledge, skills and attitudes in communicating with children, facilitation, inclusion and non-discrimination. They need to be aware of and committed to organisational codes of conduct and child protection policies to ensure that they do not put children at risk. In organisations which have more than 10 staff members, a human resource development approach to capacity building is required, so that such skills are identified as core competencies that are included in job descriptions, sought out during recruitment, integrated into induction training and supported through ongoing capacity building opportunities, supervision and management reviews.

Furthermore, organisational policies also require flexibility to support staff to work at times that suit children, including week-ends and evenings. Increased efforts are needed to use the school calendar and seasonal calendars (in contexts where children work) to inform work planning time lines, and to maximise support to child led initiatives and child participatory processes at times that suit girls and boys.

In rights based programming, both horizontal and vertical relationships are redrawn, and a wide range of individuals and actors are reconceptualised as accountable for their actions¹³. Thus, in recent years there have been increasing efforts among organisations to be accountable to beneficiaries. Agencies promoting and advocating for children’s participation need to ‘walk the talk’ and demonstrate how they themselves are supporting meaningful participation and increasing their accountability to children¹⁴.

Creating opportunities for children’s meaningful involvement in all stages of programming:

Save the Children defines child rights programming as ‘using the principles of children’s rights to plan, implement and monitor programmes with the overall goal of improving the position of children so that all boys and girls can fully enjoy their rights and can live in societies that acknowledge and respect children’s rights’¹⁵. Child rights based approaches encourage children’s participation in all stages of programming. Children’s participation in programming is more meaningful when girls and boys have been involved from the earliest stages. For example, through involving children and young people in causality analysis of child rights violations or gaps, they will be able to contribute to a greater understanding of the immediate, underlying and structural causes. Children’s involvement in child rights situational analysis further enables them to more effectively inform and influence strategic planning and the design of programmes that can improve their child rights situation and/or environment. Children can also be effectively involved in developing relevant objectives and indicators that would indicate change in their daily lives and realisation of their rights. Furthermore, when children are familiar with project objectives and indicators and have been actively involved in the planning, they can play a more meaningful role in implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Case Example: In Burma, in 2010 Save the Children organised a series of training workshop on child rights programming for approximately 100 coordinators and managers. During the training staff assessed when and where children’s participation was most and least supported in the programme cycle. The weakest area was in the design phase, especially in influencing Save the

¹³ see Gready and Ensor, 2005

¹⁴ see Save the Children, 2010

¹⁵ Save the Children, 2007

Children's annual plan. As a result and as part of endeavours to increase accountability to children more efforts were made to consult children in a timely manner and to bring children's representatives together to inform the annual planning process. In May 2011, 34 children's representatives from 17 townships where Save the Children were implementing programmes were brought together in a National Children's Forum to share their feedback on all the different sector programmes - child protection, education, child survival, hunger, and HIV/AIDS. The girls and boys (17 girls, 17 boys) aged 9 – 18 years were from diverse backgrounds including working children and children from poor families. The process included the development and dissemination of a child friendly version of Save the Children's strategic plan and additional information sharing with children on each thematic programme plan. Children were able to share their feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the existing programmes, and to share their ideas to inform the 2012 annual planning process.

Encouraging inclusion and non-discriminatory practice:

The principle of non-discrimination is fundamental to child rights programming and to citizenship work with children and young people. Rights based programming involves reaching the most marginalised, using the CRC as a tool to understand and challenge issues of discrimination within the established system, promoting girls’ and boys’ participation in decision-making processes, focusing on values of inclusion. Many forms of discrimination are subtle and pervasive. Thus, as organisations we need systematic efforts to identify and combat all forms of discrimination. We need to make certain that we are reaching out to the most marginalised and excluded girls and boys, empowering them to raise their voices and challenge discrimination.

When initiating participatory processes, consultations or Forums for children, many UN agencies, NGOs and Governments tend to find it easier to reach out to and to involve school going children. In international Children’s Forums and meetings there has been a tendency for children who can speak English, Spanish or French to be selected rather than their peers who may only speak local languages. Furthermore, when supporting children to form their own children’s groups in communities or in schools, children may replicate existing power structures and power relations, where-by the better off, older children have more control and influence, unless processes encourage boys and girls to reflect on principles and practices of non-discrimination, inclusion and equity. At all levels, in community based initiatives, in national, regional and global processes more efforts are needed to genuinely reach and engage the most marginalised children, including out of school working children, children with disabilities, children from ethnic minority groups, children affected by HIV/AIDS, and younger children.

Discrimination is often one of the root causes of human rights violations. Thus, in all work with children and young people it is important to encourage them to reflect on patterns of discrimination and inequity, and to address different forms of discrimination faced by children from adults, as well as discrimination among children. Especially when the most marginalised children are reached and involved in participatory processes, girls and boys can be very effective actors and advocates for non-discrimination and equity.

Through inclusive children’s participation initiatives, girls and boys from different backgrounds regularly come together, play, talk and undertake common activities. Such efforts function to transform attitudes and break down traditional forms of discrimination based on gender, religion, dis/ability, ethnicity, caste, age etc.

In some situations, it has also proven useful to form distinct groups of children who share common experiences based on gender, disability, work or ethnicity before encouraging them to join with other groups of children. This helps increase their understanding of their particular situation and the reasons for their oppression; it builds their confidence and positive identity. For example, in some parts of Bangladesh, India and Nepal, children and young people with disabilities have formed their own organisations, networks and media initiatives. While undertaking their own initiatives, they are also actively engage in participatory initiatives with other children and young people.

“We were totally deprived. We never thought we could participate in this type of process. Once we started coming together and discussing we learned there are many children like us. Now we are happy and proud. We have discovered that children have rights and if we all unite together we can get people to listen to what we have to say. We discuss things together and we will raise the problems we face and present some ideas for solving them to the Government and organisations working for the development of children. We can influence their plans.”
(A group of street children with disabilities, CSID, Bangladesh)¹⁶

Working children have also found it beneficial to form their own organisations. Unions, associations, networks and movements of working children exist across Africa, Latin America and in parts of Asia. Through these groups, they can address problems and challenge the discrimination they face as working children. These children’s unions also work with other children’s organisations to influence wider policy developments at district, state, national and regional levels to bring about positive changes for all children¹⁷.

Case Example: *One of the earliest unions of working children in India, the Bal Mazdoor Union has held adults accountable when children’s rights have been severely violated. In 1994 the Union brought to light the callous death of 15 year old Zaffar Imam caused by his employer. Through dialogue with the Chief Minister of Delhi the Union changed the charge against the accused employer from attempted murder to an actual murder charge. Furthermore, on behalf of the child’s parents the Union filed a case in the Delhi High Court for financial compensation.*

The power of the collective – empowering children to defend and claim their rights:
Inspired by movements and associations of working children in different regions of the world, there is increasing recognition and support for children’s collective organisation. Facilitating and strengthening children’s organisations and networks has proved to be an effective strategy to help children and young people become active citizens by providing them the experience of democracy; and increasing their power to claim their rights through their collective power.

Case example, Afghanistan: *Action by Working Children’s Group to prevent Police Harassment: A boy in Kabul was regularly beaten by the police whilst working. The police beat the child to get money from him. The boy raised his concern in their working children’s group at a drop in centre established for working children. The children discussed the problem and gained the support of their centre facilitator to join them in visiting the local police station. A group of children and their adult supporter visited the local police station to discuss the problem, to talk about their rights and*

¹⁶ O’Kane, 2003

¹⁷ see Ratna, 2011 for an example in the Karnataka State in India

negotiate with the police for better behaviour. The local police changed their behaviour and became more collaborative with the working children’s centre.

Children’s organisations give girls and boys the opportunity to come together to share their experiences, access information, and analyse issues and power relations that affect them. In their varied organisational forms (unions, clubs, associations, parliaments etc) children and young people have highlighted a range of child rights issues and injustices, and have made their parents, local communities, religious leaders, media, local and national government officials and institutions take notice of their views and become responsive to injustices in very powerful and transformative ways. Through their participation and organisation, children have increased realisation of their rights to protection, development and survival¹⁸; and they have contributed to community development, and wider development and peace processes¹⁹.

Case example, in a rural district of **Bangladesh**, girls and boys under the age of 14 years have (separately) come together to form Shishu Parishads (children’s councils) at village level. Elected members (girls and boys) from the village level Shishu Parishads also form higher level councils at the ward, union and district level. Priority issues discussed by the boys and girls have included: early marriage, child labour, poverty, lack of access to education (especially for girls), harassment of girls, child trafficking and lack of play equipment. During a field visit in Bangladesh, the author observed a village drama presented by some young village girls who were members of two different Shishu Parishads. Overcoming traditional barriers the girls groups confidently presented a drama to a crowd of about 200 including children, women and some male village elders. The play highlighted the problem of early marriage, its negative impact and the range of actions the Shishu Parishad (children’s council) members were taking to stop early marriage in their village. Later discussions with representatives from the district level Shishu Parishad (children’s council) revealed how the children had been successful in stopping a number of instances of early marriage through gaining the support of religious elders to support children’s council members in negotiating with parents.

Institutionalising space for children’s representation in governance structures and relevant decision making processes

UN agencies and INGOs have an important role to play in influencing and supporting Governments, schools and families to create and institutionalise increased ‘space’ for children’s representation in governance structures and relevant decision making processes at every level, in families, schools, communities, work place, in local governance and in wider society – in the broader policy arena, so that they may influence practice and policy developments on issues affecting them. Enabling increased space for ‘children’s agency’ is relevant to both human rights and human development paradigms; as both recognise the importance of agency and participation in decision making processes that affect their lives²⁰.

Case example, in **Nepal** Village Development Committees (VDCs) and Municipalities are the national political system’s local level governing bodies. The VDCs have the mandate over education, health and other basic services. Child Clubs can register as organisation at the VDC level; and in some areas VDCs are providing financial support for the Child Clubs. Furthermore, in some districts, including Palpa district, representatives from Child Club Networks are invited to participate in

¹⁸ see O’Kane, 2003; Save the Children et al, 2008.

¹⁹ see Hart, 1997; Plan, 2004; Save the Children Norway 2008; UNICEF, 2009.

²⁰ Sakire, 2010

regular VDC meetings; and in meetings of the ‘District Child Welfare Board’ (DCWB) which is formed with representation of concerned government officials and other relevant agencies. The DCWB is mandated to adopt district level policy and programmes for the overall development of children and for promoting and protecting their rights. Thus, through children’s representation they are able to raise concerns regarding child rights violations and gaps in their communities and district; and are able to regularly influence policy and programmes affecting them.

In countries affected by insecurity and conflict, children and young people have also advocated for space to influence peace and security agendas; and Save the Children are supporting and advocating for increased recognition of children as agents of peace²¹.

Case example, Uganda: Children involved in Peace Clubs and associations in Northern Uganda were persistent in advocating for inclusion of children’s voices and children’s representation in the formal peace talks that were underway in 2007. In September 2007, more than 200 children and young people from four districts of Northern Uganda and Teso region were consulted on reconciliation and accountability - agenda 3 of the formal peace talks taking place in Juba. The consultations were collaboratively organised by NGOs²² and UNICEF. The outcomes of the consultations were presented to Government representatives who were involved in the peace talks. The Government officials also met with children’s representatives to gain further insight into their perspectives. In the emerging agreement on Agenda 3 between the Government of the Republic of Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army, there is a section on children that emphatically includes the need to “recognise and consider the experiences, views and concerns of children;” “to protect the dignity, privacy and security of children in any accountability and reconciliation proceedings;” to “ensure that children are not subjected to criminal justice proceedings, but may participate in reconciliation processes,” and to “encourage and facilitate the participation of children in the processes for implementing this agreement.”

Furthermore, during 2007 – 2008 representatives of Children’s Peace Clubs and associations in Gulu also met regularly with the District Speaker, who acknowledged the importance of children’s views and vowed to support children’s advocacy efforts as part of his fight for the rights of children in the District. Opportunities for children’s representatives to be included in the District Council have been explored to ensure follow up to children’s issues including: access to quality school for all displaced and returnee children; better support to children in need of care and protection, including children who are disabled or traumatized; and increased efforts to address stigma and discrimination faced by displaced and war affected children.

Ethical Practice and Basic requirements for children’s participation:

The power imbalance between adults and children requires an ongoing focus on the ethical issues that arise when working in participatory ways with children and young people. Particular concerns arising in relation to adult’s power and children’s participation include: risks that girls or boys may face by speaking out; risks of abuse or exploitation through their participation; risks of over-burdening children; raising false expectations; lack of transparency regarding children’s influence; issues regarding informed consent and use of information produced by children and young people; as well as concerns about inclusion, non-discrimination and fair representation²³. Ethical issues are enhanced in socio-political contexts

²¹ see Save the Children Norway, 2008; O’Kane et al, 2009; UNICEF, 2009

²² Concerned Parents Association, Trans-cultural Psychosocial Organization, Save the Children in Uganda

²³ O’Kane, 2003

which are characterised by conflict or insecurity²⁴. As practitioners and policy makers we must be committed to ethical practice and to ensuring that we minimise any risks to children; including systematic application of our agencies’ child protection policies. There is an emerging consensus as to the requirements for achieving quality standards for effective and ethical participation. **Nine basic requirements** are elaborated in the CRC General Comment on Article 12²⁵ namely that participation must be:

- 1) **Transparent and informative** - children must be provided with full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about their right to express their views freely and their views to be given due weight, and how this participation will take place, its scope, purpose and potential impact;
- 2) **Voluntary** - children should never be coerced into expressing views against their wishes and they should be informed that they can cease involvement at any stage;
- 3) **Respectful** - children’s views have to be treated with respect and they should be provided with opportunities to initiate ideas and activities. Adults working with children should acknowledge, respect and build on good examples of children’s participation, for instance, in their contributions to the family, school, culture and the work environment. They also need an understanding of the socio-economic, environmental and cultural context of children’s lives. Persons and organizations working for and with children should also respect children’s views with regard to participation in public events;
- 4) **Relevant** - the issues on which children have the right to express their views must be of real relevance to their lives and enable them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities. In addition, space needs to be created to enable children to highlight and address the issues they themselves identify as relevant and important;
- 5) **Child-friendly** - environments and working methods should be adapted to children’s capacities. Adequate time and resources should be made available to ensure that children are adequately prepared and have the confidence and opportunity to contribute their views. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that children will need differing levels of support and forms of involvement according to their age and evolving capacities;
- 6) **Inclusive** - participation must be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for marginalized children, including both girls and boys, to be involved. Children are not a homogenous group and participation needs to provide for equality of opportunity for all, without discrimination on any grounds. Programmes also need to ensure that they are culturally sensitive to children from all communities;
- 7) **Supported by training** - adults need preparation, skills and support to facilitate children’s participation effectively, to provide them, for example, with skills in listening, working jointly with children and engaging children effectively in accordance with their evolving capacities. Children themselves can be involved as trainers and facilitators on how to promote effective participation; they require capacity-building to strengthen their skills in, for example, effective participation awareness of their rights, and training in organizing meetings, raising funds, dealing with the media, public speaking and advocacy;
- 8) **Safe and sensitive to risk** - in certain situations, expression of views may involve risks. Adults have a responsibility towards the children with whom they work and must take every precaution to minimize the risk to children of violence, exploitation or any other negative consequence of their participation. Action necessary to provide appropriate protection will include the development of a clear child-protection strategy which recognizes the particular risks faced by some groups of children, and the extra barriers they face in obtaining help.
- 9) **Accountable** - a commitment to follow-up and evaluation is essential. For example, in any research or consultative process, children must be informed as to how their views have

²⁴ See Hart and Tyrer, 2006; Save the Children 2008b

²⁵ Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.12, The Right of the Child to be Heard, CRC/C/GC/12, July 2009 . These basic requirements are, in large part, based on the Save the Children practice standards which were published in 2005.

been interpreted and used and, where necessary, provided with the opportunity to challenge and influence the analysis of the findings. Children are also entitled to be provided with clear feedback on how their participation has influenced any outcomes. Wherever appropriate, children should be given the opportunity to participate in follow-up processes or activities. Monitoring and evaluation of children’s participation needs to be undertaken, where possible, with children themselves.

Opportunities to increase meaningful and inclusive processes for children’s participation and agency:

The concluding paragraphs of the Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.12 on the Right of the Child to be Heard (2009) emphasized how *‘Investment in the realization of the child’s right to be heard in all matters of concern to her or him and for her or his views to be given due consideration, is a clear and immediate legal obligation of States parties under the Convention. It is the right of every child without any discrimination. Achieving meaningful opportunities for the implementation of article 12 will necessitate dismantling the legal, political, economic, social and cultural barriers that currently impede children’s opportunity to be heard and their access to participation in all matters affecting them. It requires a preparedness to challenge assumptions about children’s capacities, and to encourage the development of environments in which children can build and demonstrate capacities. It also requires a commitment to resources and training’.*

To increase meaningful opportunities for children’s participation and agency, it is clear that greater and more systematic efforts are needed by adult duty bearers, including governments, to support and institutionalize children and young people’s participation in decision-making processes structures and policies at all levels. Special efforts are needed to involve the most marginalized children and young people.

Within the Human Development Reporting process increased efforts are also needed to engage with and seek the views of girls and boys from diverse backgrounds. Increased attention to children’s agency, as active citizens who create and maintain positive outcomes should be incorporated.

Children as Active Citizens:

A shift in paradigm to promote children’s civil rights and active citizenship will help achieve more systematic practice and policy developments concerning children’s agency and participation by State governments, UN agencies and civil society actors²⁶. New and stronger partnerships between governments, UN agencies, international and national NGOs, and community-based and child-led organizations are needed to increase realization of children’s civil rights. Fulfilment of civil rights can help children claim their rights and hold governments and other adult actors accountable for their commitments.

“It is our right to be acknowledged as full citizens and given the chance to perform our citizenship role as adults do. At least we should be heard when adults make decisions about us.” (Boy, member of Child Club, Sri Lanka²⁷)

²⁶ see Inter-Agency Working Group, 2008; Feinstein and O’Kane, 2009

²⁷ O’Kane, 2003

The Inter-Agency Working Group on Children’s Participation in the East Asia and Pacific region have developed a policy and programming guide which provides a strong rationale for the promotion of children’s civic participation and citizenship as an essential contribution to realizing children’s rights, and to achieving major international development commitments for children. It identifies a set of basic actions that government departments, civil society organizations and the media should take to promote children’s civil rights and active citizenship. It provides guidance on capacities; structures and resources needed to strengthen children’s civil rights and proposes ways to measure the civic participation of children in society.

Sakire (2010) suggests that the human rights paradigm supports agency in a different way from human development, because citizens are engaged to defend human rights. However, recognising and empowering children as citizens also complements the Human Development paradigm, as it is a process of ‘*enlarging people’s choices*’. Systematic efforts to increase children’s rights to information, participation, association and other civil rights would lead to increased access to education, health, protection and legal services; as well as a means to increase their participation and choices with their families, schools, communities, work place and wider society.

Framework for monitoring and evaluating children’s participation:

In recent years, there has also been growing recognition of the need for more rigorous approaches to monitoring and evaluating children’s participation, to inform a body of evidence demonstrating the benefits of children’s participation. The potential for improved monitoring has been strengthened by the adoption of the *CRC General Comment No.12*, which provides new clarity in elaborating the scope of Article 12 and how governments are expected to implement it²⁸.

Through the development of clearer indicators and benchmarks against which to chart children’s participation, it will be possible to:

- define the legislative and policy environment needed to promote and respect children’s right to participation
- enable children to gain a greater understanding of what they hope to achieve,
- assess the strengths and weaknesses of initiatives and the quality of the participation process
- identify what support and resources are needed to strengthen children’s participation
- provide evidence to support the case for political commitment to the realisation of children’s participation rights.

This September (2011), Save the Children, UNICEF, Plan International, World Vision and the Concerned for Working Children, supported by funding from the Oak Foundation, launched a pilot study to test out a new conceptual framework, supported by a toolkit, for monitoring and evaluating children’s participation. Children and young people will be actively involved in the monitoring and evaluation processes.

The **framework**²⁹ falls into two discrete but linked parts:

²⁸ Further guidance is provided in the accompanying resource guide, *Every Child’s Right to be Heard* published by Save the Children/UNICEF.

²⁹ Developed by Gerison Lansdown

- **Benchmarks or standards** against which to **measure the extent to which the environment at the national and local level is conducive to respect for children’s right to participate** – whether the necessary legislative, policy, social and cultural changes have been made. It can be used to help determine priorities for advocacy in building a culture of respect for children’s right to express views and be taken seriously.
- **Benchmarks or standards** against which to **measure the actual experience of participation**:
 - **Scope** - what degree of participation has been achieved and at what stages of programme development - in other words – *What is being done?*
 - **Quality** - to what extent have participatory processes complied with the agreed standards for effective practice – in other words – *How is it being done?*
 - **Outcome** - what has been the outcome – on young people themselves, on families, on the supporting agency, and on the wider realisation of young people’s rights within families, local communities and at local and national governmental level – in other words – *What has been achieved?*

The **toolkit**³⁰ provides detailed guidance on how to actively involve children and young people in monitoring and evaluation; and includes strategies and participatory activities that are conducive to collecting and analysing the various benchmarks and standards with children and adults.

A global steering group comprising representatives from the five international organisations has been established. Children’s participation projects from 12 countries³¹ have been involved a global workshop³² to learn about the materials, and agree the process and timetable for the pilot. Over the coming 18 months, these projects will test out the framework and toolkit, and provide feedback and guidance on their value and changes needed to improve their accessibility, usefulness and practicality. Once the pilot has been completed, the materials will be revised and made available on CRIN³³ as a resource which can be used by any organisation wishing to monitor and evaluate its children’s participation programming. Through this process, we hope not only to strengthen the capacity for effective measurement of children’s participation, but also to build a body of more systematic evidence on the work that is being undertaken around the world and the outcomes it is producing for children’s lives, including children’s contributions as active citizens to development, peace and human rights.

Furthermore, the indicators and benchmarks included in the first part of the framework to measure the extent to which the environment is conducive to respect for children’s right to participate can be reviewed to inform future developments of dimensions in the Human Development index, to increase opportunities to identify and report on children’s agency and capabilities through the Human Development Reports.

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³⁰ Developed by Claire O’Kane

³¹ Zambia, Ghana, Somalia, Burundi, Senegal, Nepal, India, Nigeria, Vietnam, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and Guatemala

³² in Nairobi in June 2011

³³ Child Rights Information Network <http://www.crin.org/>

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