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# Children's participation in society; a key to development: children as essential actors in improving their lives and communities

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## **Children’s Participation in Society; A Key to Development**

**Children as essential actors in improving their lives and communities**



Julia Movshovich  
Mémoire dirigé par M. Bertrand Simon

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## Abstract

Participation has become a key aspect of development in the last 40 years. Children's participation in particular is gaining ground in NGO work and international initiatives. As established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the fundamental right to express their views and have them taken seriously. Children and young people have first hand experience of the hardships and challenges that they face in their communities. They are capable of observing and assessing these issues and proposing solutions. As civil society challenges democracies to uphold justice and equality, children and young people hold the key to providing special knowledge and innovative approaches to bringing about changes in their communities and regions, and improving overall society. Making them partners in change means holding governments accountable to a bigger and more united public, leading to a sustainable path of development.

## Synthèse

Depuis 40 ans, la participation devient un aspect clé du développement. La participation des enfants en particuliers prend de l'importance dans le travail des ONGs et des initiatives internationales. Conformément à La Convention Relative aux Droits de l'Enfant, tous les enfants disposent du droit fondamental de s'exprimer et d'être pris au sérieux. Les enfants et les jeunes possèdent une expérience personnelle sur les difficultés et les défis auxquels leurs communautés doivent faire face. Ils sont en mesure d'observer et d'évaluer les problèmes et de proposer des solutions. Si la société civile met au défi les démocraties sur la capacité de maintenir la justice et l'égalité, les enfants et les jeunes se positionnent comme les acteurs clés en mesure de fournir des connaissances uniques et des approches innovantes pour apporter des changements dans leurs communautés et régions, et améliorer la société dans son ensemble. Faire d'eux les partenaires du changement signifie obliger les gouvernements à rendre des comptes à un plus grand public, ce qui nous mènera sur une voie durable de développement.

Keywords: participation, children, young people, democracy, development, human rights, children's rights, youth councils

Mots clef : participation, les enfants, les jeunes, la démocratie, le développement, le droit de l'homme, le droit de l'enfant, les enfants, les jeunes, conseil jeunesse

## Abbreviations

- **BVL:** Bernard Van Leer Organization
- **CATS:** Children as Actors for Transforming Society
- **CtoC:** Child to Child Trust
- **CWC:** The Concerned for Working Children
- **GMC:** Global Movement for Children
- **IICD:** International Institute for Child Rights and Development
- **IofC:** Initiatives of Change
- **MDGs:** Millennium Development Goals
- **PYALARA:** The Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation
- **SC:** Save the Children
- **TRDP:** Thardeep Rural Development Programme
- **UEF:** Universal Education Foundation
- **UDHR:** Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- **UN:** United Nations
- **UNCRC/ CRC:** United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- **UNDP:** United Nations Development Programme
- **UNESCO:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
- **UNGASS:** United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children
- **UNICEF:** United Nations Children’s Fund

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## Introduction

*“Participatory processes require those in charge to give up some of their power. This is challenging and threatening at the best of times but how much more so when those concerned are children? Do we have the courage to let go and follow where they will lead?” (Plan Report, 2004, “Children changing their world”)*

As we become more and more interconnected in this globalized world where numerous actors work together and compete, the rights of every individual on this Earth are increasingly important to uphold in order to guarantee an inclusive society. Yet, many of those who truly affect our future are not the oldest and wisest among us, who will soon leave us, or even the middle-aged, but rather, the youngest, those who will be here to see the next generation through.

Children and youth make up roughly one third of the world’s population and yet their voices are far too often muted. They have innovative ideas, opinions, and perspectives that deserve to be heard, and more importantly, that could help society improve. Children and young people will affect our future but they also affect the present, indeed “children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect” (Korczak, 1979). In this day and age, children’s participation is not only a human right, but also a necessity if we are to develop for the better.

Children have a fundamental human right to participation, upheld by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 1989 and ratified by 191 countries around the world. While the UNCRC addresses children’s rights to protection, education, and health, among other liberties, there is a special focus on aspects relating to children’s participation, in particular in Articles 12 to 15. Perhaps the most obvious reference to child participation is under Article 12 in expressing the child’s “*right to express their opinions freely, and have their opinions taken into account in matters that affect them.*” Despite the adoption of this Convention and progress that has been made in the last 25 years, much more still needs to be done to establish societies that allow for and accept children’s participation.

Hart, Newman, and Ackermann (2004) explain the increased interest in children’s participation and the connection to the UNCRC.

“During the 1990s...child-focused organisations became increasingly interested in the participation of children. Many are now explicitly seeking to create or support opportunities

for young people to express themselves and be involved in decision-making. The motivation for this is partly explained by a general shift in agency thinking towards seeing children as bearers of rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was adopted by the United Nations in 1989 and ratified almost universally since then, has played a vital role in encouraging and shaping this change in attitude (p.9).”

One might ask, why is children’s participation so important? Theories linking participation, democracy, and development have continuously evolved and demonstrated the connections between them. However, the general concept of participation in the field of development has more often than not left out about 40% of the world’s population, those under 25 years of age. If we look hard around us though, we will find unlimited examples of children and young people influencing their communities, making positive changes, and leading development initiatives. From young people influencing law reform in South Africa, to Indian children fighting against violence in their communities, to Chilean young people working to alleviate urban poverty, inspiring stories are all around us.

In fact, nowadays, the work that children and young people are doing is being recognized ever more. This year’s winners of the Nobel Peace Prize were two advocates of children. Malala Yousafzai, a young person herself, and Kailash Satyarthi are just two examples of the recognition given to the importance of the impact that children can make in improving our world. However, bringing children’s issues to the limelight is not so simple. Because of cultural perceptions of childhood and traditional customs of adult authority, accepting children’s participation often means breaking outdated traditions, which can prove to be quite challenging.

Furthermore, we may even witness people and institutions that have the best intentions in trying to uphold children’s participation, making mistakes. In some cases we witness tokenistic approaches. These are approaches in which adults do not provide a space where children can freely participate, but rather a controlled situation where children are directed to serve an adult purpose. True children’s participation means children and young people volunteering their time and opinions and expressing them freely in a way that is natural to them.

In many ways, this paper was inspired by the CATS Conference- Children as Actors for Society, a new initiative created in 2012 consisting in a series of conferences organized by, with, and for children and young people to promote children’s participation in society. Created through a

partnership between Initiatives of Change, Child-to-Child Trust, and Universal Education Foundation, the CATS Conference is a meeting ground for professionals and individuals working on children's issues, child and youth advocates, teachers, families, and others interested in children's issues. In just two years it has brought together diverse participants from around the globe, representatives of various NGOs and political organizations, and experts, all working together towards making children's voices heard.

The main goal of the CATS project is to create a more inclusive society in which children's voices can be heard and one in which they can be active decision-makers in their own lives and in the future of society. Attempting to achieve these goals is what takes place during an annual weeklong conference, the aim being to expand CATS into a program later on, which can be implemented year-round globally through different organizations and individuals.

The topic of children's rights and participation in society is at the center of this work. Through the different participating organizations at CATS and diverse individuals, including UNICEF, Save the Children, Eurochild, World Vision, and others, it became apparent that children's participation is not simply about children's rights and our need to recognize these rights, but rather something much bigger. Through children's participation, communities can thrive, environments can improve, and society can progress and develop. Children's participation leads to development.

If our goal is to promote children's rights and participation in society, then it is necessary to prove how this approach can better society and people in general. Therefore, the question needs to be asked: how *does* children's participation change society? Here, theories and concrete examples will aim to demonstrate that through the implementation of children's rights and participation in society, local and regional development is heightened, leading to more democratic and just societies and the improvement of both children's and adults' lives.

Chapter 1 will be a more theoretical approach to understanding children's participation. We will start by first defining participation in general and then more specifically children's participation, linking it's importance to establishing true participatory democracies. Whereas many democracies are representative, in which a small number of people represent the common public, participatory democracies are more true to holding governments accountable and including citizens in decision-making. Protests and revolutions in the last decade have proven that representative democracies are not meeting the needs of the public. We will then see how participatory democracies are the path to

development. Including children and young people in participatory citizenship means making them stakeholders in their lives, therefore making them key actors in leading to positive change in society.

Chapter 2 we will examine the evolution of children's rights and highlight its importance in terms of participation. This includes children's roles and importance in governance and decision-making and the importance of children's participation in governance. Youth councils exist around the world, some which will demonstrate examples of children's participation in decision-making. The chapter will finish off with a look at some of the key aspects of resistance to children's participation. Whether it be adults' hesitance to give up authority, or organizations' inability to restructure themselves in a way to include children, children's participation meets many challenges and obstacles.

Chapter 3 will focus on concrete examples of children's participation in development around the world. Starting with a general overview of the work that NGOs, especially those working on children's issues, are doing in terms of children's participation, we will follow with a closer look at the CATS Conference as a new initiative on this theme.

We will round off Chapter 2 with a series of examples of children's participation from four different regions, including The Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. A focus on developing countries will be made rather than on developed countries, to demonstrate how children and young people in developing countries empower themselves and develop their communities.

## **1. Participation and Democracy, Making Space for Children**

“Democracy without citizen deliberation and participation is ultimately an empty and meaningless concept (Pimbert and Wakeford, 2001).” Participatory democracy means that citizens of democratic countries have a hand in the political system they live in. Without this participation, a democracy simply cannot be.

Antoine Bévort (2002) argues that representative democracy, one in which a representative government, elected freely by the citizens of that country, govern on their behalf, has been exhausted. People no longer trust their governments or believe them to be ruling on their behalf. In many countries around the world, in the developed and developing world, populations are protesting against corrupt, power hungry governments, who claim to represent them while actually catering to financial institutions, international powers, and big corporations.

A real democracy is one in which citizens can truly participate and feel that they are justly represented. All citizens, young and old, have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives and have a say in the way their country is run.

### **What is Participation?**

Participation; it’s a term we hear used all the time, in family settings, in the workplace, in our local communities and in government, but what does it really mean? Citizen participation in particular, is a term that while at times vague, seems to reappear over and over in various different domains, from the political world, to the public world, to development. Its controversy lies in it’s multiple interpretations; participation is a concept that can be understood in different manners, sometimes simply hinting at involvement and other times blatantly demanding it. The notion of citizen participation was already being discussed and debated on an institutional level over five decades ago. Tandon (2008) explains:

Kings, monarchs, chieftains, religious gurus and rulers of other likes and faiths attempted to organize human habitats, economies and societies from the top down... However, the human

spirit and its manifestation in communitarian organizing have also attempted to defy such efforts at centralized regimes.<sup>1</sup>

These attempts to defy centralized regimes is what can now be seen as citizen participation and community organizing.

Citizen participation, defined by Arnstein, after establishing the “Ladder of Participation” in 1969 “*is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society.*”<sup>2</sup> This underlines the point that while participation is for all citizens, it can be particularly important for those who are powerless and have no voice.

It is the aspect of having true power through participation that makes citizen participation in democracy crucial. Far too often, participation is written off as something that would be a good idea and politically correct, but not seen all the way through in terms of how to fully implement it.

Roger Hart (1992), who later adapted Arnstein’s ‘Ladder of Participation’ to children’s participation, defines participation as “the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured (p.7).” Both Arnstein and Hart demonstrate how participation comes in many forms, some which are disguised as citizen participation, and others that truly aim towards that.

Arnstein, like others after her, rightly establish that there are many levels to participation, which can range from participation without one’s voice truly being heard, to participation where individuals are truly making an impact through their voice and work. It can range from consultation, to decision-making; from providing information, to initiating projects. These various types of participation typologies co-exist including what some, including Cornwall (2008), call ‘interactive participation’ and ‘self-mobilization “where people take the initiative independently of external organizations, developing contacts for resources and technical assistance but retain control over the

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<sup>1</sup> Tandon, R. (2008). Participation, citizenship and democracy: Reflections on 25 years' of PRIA. *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), 284-296.

<sup>2</sup> Arnstein, S. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35, 216-224.

resources.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, it’s important to understand why people participate, as this will in many ways shape *how* they participate. Sarah White (1996) demonstrates the numerous ways in which people can participate for a variety of different reasons as seen in Figure 1. A Typology of Interests.

**Table 2** A typology of interests

Form	What ‘participation’ means to the implementing agency	What ‘participation’ means for those on the receiving end	What ‘participation’ is for
Nominal	Legitimation- to show they are doing something	Inclusion- to retain some access to potential benefits	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency- to limit funders’ input, draw on community contributors and make project more cost-effective	Cost- of time spent on project-related labour and other activities	As a means to achieving cost-effectiveness and local facilities
Representative	Sustainability- to avoid creating dependency	Leverage- to influence the shape the project takes and its management	To give people a voice in determining their own development
Transformative	Empowerment- to enable people to make their own decisions, work out what to do and take action	Empowerment- to be able to decide and act for themselves	Both as a means and an end, a continuing dynamic

**Figure 1. A Typology of Interests<sup>4</sup>**

In addition to different types of participation, there are also different degrees. Some processes may include participation in all stages and decisions, while other are only partial. People may be involved and included in the beginning of a project but not necessarily at the end. For example, local residents of a community may be called upon for consultation by the local government in the beginning stages of a project, but not participate in making final decisions. On the other hand, residents may decide to establish local committees that request to participate in all levels of decision-making. Although participation all the way through is ideal, it is often difficult to have all-inclusive participation one hundred percent of the way.

<sup>3</sup> Cornwall, A. (2008). Unpacking 'Participation': Models, Meanings And Practices. *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), 269-283.

<sup>4</sup> White (1996) p.7-9, In Cornwall, A. (2008). Unpacking 'Participation': Models, Meanings And Practices. *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), 269-283.

Most participatory processes do not and literally cannot involve ‘everyone’. In practice, explicit or implicit choices are usually made as to who might take part. These may be inherent in the choice of methodology: they emerge most clearly in distinctions between approaches that place greater degrees of emphasis on the participation of representatives – those who speak about and for a particular interest group – and those that seek more directly democratic forms of participation. In practice, these boundaries tend to be blurred.<sup>5</sup>

Not only are there varying types of participation, but also varying types of participants themselves, who all have different interests and goals. For some, participation can be used as a means, or what is also known as ‘instrumental’ participation, for others participation is an end in itself, known as ‘transformative’ participation.<sup>6</sup> There are therefore, many different factors that need to be taken into account when we speak of participation. Who are the participants and what are their goals? At what degree are they participating and in what kind of activity?

All of these aspects play a part in establishing what participation is and especially what it is not. Whatever the reason, participation is a strong tool for citizens, and when given the opportunity to use it to the fullest, it can lead to transforming communities, regions, and society. Oakley (1995) argues that effective people’s participation challenges government’s and holds them to be more accountable. He explains that studies conducted by Dasgupta, an economist and researcher, demonstrate “the evidence of a link between broad popular political participation and national economic and social development programmes and projects (p.9).”

Children’s participation, with it’s own set of interpretations and levels, should not be set apart from general citizen participation, but rather fit inside it. Far too often, children and youth have been excluded in reflections on participation even though it is their given right to be accounted for as well.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

## 1.1 Including children and youth in citizenship participation

Citizenship, a key concept of society and democracy presupposes that all people in a society have the right to participate. As children are citizens<sup>7</sup>, they also have the right to participate and make their voices heard.

**Citizenship, a status conferred upon people with full membership in society, entitles one to:**

- civil rights: freedom of speech, liberty and justice
- political right: participation in political decision-making
- social rights: economic and social security, provisions of social welfare.

**Figure 2. T.H. Marshall’s definition of citizenship<sup>8</sup>**

More importantly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, established a child’s right to participation, expressed largely through Article 12, which specifies children’s rights to express their opinions and have them taken seriously. Lansdown (2010) explains that even very young children can form views and that there should be no lower age limit on the right to participate, nor should it be limited to expression in “adult” language (p.12). A UNICEF (2001) report prepared by Lansdown explains:

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which formally and explicitly acknowledges these rights for children for the first time in international law, also introduces an additional dimension to the status of children by recognising that children are subjects of rights, rather than merely recipients of adult protection, and that those rights demand that children themselves are entitled to be heard.<sup>9</sup>

This clarifies that children can and should be active participants in society and in the democratic process. A democracy should be inclusive of children within the citizen population, as active partners in bringing about change and voicing their opinions.

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<sup>7</sup> Citizen: a person who legally belongs to a country and has the rights and protection of that country. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

<sup>8</sup> Save the Children. Written by O’Kane, C. (2013). *Child Right’s Governance. Pushing the Boundaries: A guide to increasing the realization of children’s civil rights and freedoms.* Child Rights Governance Global Initiative, Save the Children.

<sup>9</sup> Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting Children’s Participation in democratic Decision-Making.* UNICEF, Innocenti Insight: UNICEF

## What is Children's Participation?

Reddy and Ratna (2002) argue that “children’s participation is no different from that of adults. Children may represent themselves as individuals or be represented by their organisations or they may even represent their organization (p.16).” However, the simple fact that they are children, and not adults, changes the paradigm of how we function. Indeed, they will contribute in different ways and should not be judged and measured based on norms that we may have for how an adult would participate. First we need to understand the child, their context, and their approach.

To begin with, what do we mean when we say “children”? Keep in mind that children at different ages see the world differently, think and react differently and express themselves in various ways. So while we generally use the term “children” or “young people”, we should also be aware of the fact that there are differences from one age to another, and even in one age group, each child is unique. The UNCRC defines a child as a human being under the age of 18.<sup>10</sup> UNICEF also considers everyone under 18 as a child. There is, of course, also a distinction to be made between children and young people. At the CATS conference, participants under the age of 10 were often referred to as children while those between 11 and 18 were called young people. “The United Nations defines young people, or ‘youth’ as: ...a statistical artifact to refer specifically to those aged 15-24 years (p.6).”<sup>11</sup> For some NGOs the ages of young people may vary slightly depending on circumstances.

Despite these varying distinctions between children and youth, there is a general consensus that these different age groups work and think in different ways, but can all participate in valuable ways. Lansdown (2010) states that

“the views of the child must be ‘given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’... Considerable evidence exists to indicate that information, experience, social and cultural expectations and levels of support all contribute to the development of

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<sup>10</sup> The United Nations. (1992). *Adopted from Teaching about human rights*. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/children/children.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> UNDP. (2000a). Jordan human development program. New York: United Nations Development Program. In Bridgland Sorenson, J. G. (2006). Constraints to youth participation in the current federal political environment. Masters Thesis, Edith Cowan University, Faculty of Community, Education and Social Science. 177 p. Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/10>

children's capacities (Lansdown 2005). Maturity, which implies the ability to understand and assess the implications of a particular decision, must therefore be considered (p.12).<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, no child at any particular age will be alike, but rather will be greatly influenced by their experiences, culture, and environment.

Addressing children's issues and especially children's participation is not easy. First and foremost, the way in which children are perceived changes from country to country. A child in a developed Western country may grow up with certain privileges that a child from a developing country may never know. The child in the Western country may grow up spending hours playing with numerous different toys, watching cartoons, and "being a child". The child from a developing country, on the other hand, may start working as early as the age of 5 and feel the weight of responsibility and duty from an early age. These are only simplified generalizations highlighting differences between growing up in the developed world versus the developing world, nonetheless, the different roles cast on these children is also a reflection of how society and family perceive them.

Historically, views of the 'Western' child have tended to see the child as lacking agency and in need of protection. In contrast 'majority world' children demonstrate significant abilities as capable citizens able to take on responsibilities and active roles in their communities. In the West this has given rise to a situation where children are often constrained by adults in their ability to be active in shaping their lives and communities, as adults seek to act in what they perceive as the best interest of the child (p. 26).<sup>13</sup>

This control of children by adults has often been a key resistance to children's participation. Even when children do 'participate', it is often through a controlled setting directed by adults. This makes it so that children, more often than not, end up participating in the ways that adults want them to, and not in a way that is natural to them. It is important to keep in mind that children do not see the world in the same way as adults and so they react differently to it. Malone and Hartung (2010) explain that "to foster children as organic intellectuals, we need to recognise that they have different criteria for what it means to participate, and that simply mimicking adults is not always the most

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<sup>12</sup> Lansdown, G. (2010), "The Realisation of Children's Participation Rights, Critical Reflections", Chapter 1, pp.11-23 In Percy-Smith, B. & Thomas, N., eds, (2010), *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation, Perspectives from Theory and Practice*, Abingdon, Routledge

<sup>13</sup> Malone, K., & Hartung, C. (2010). Challenges of participatory practice with children. In *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation, Perspectives from Theory and Practice* (pp. 24-38). Abingdon: Routledge.

authentic, empowering or beneficial type of participation (p.26).”<sup>14</sup> Once this is recognized, true participation is more likely to emerge.

Different definitions of children’s participation can be noted provided by various organizations and individuals, especially those working on children’s rights and children’s participation. All of them implicitly identify that it is a basic human right for children to participate. Chawla (2001), provides a definition of child participation:

Participation is a process in which children and youth engage with other people around issues that concern their individual and collective life conditions. Participants interact in ways that respect each other’s dignity, with the intention of achieving a shared goal. In the process, the child experiences itself as playing a useful role in the community. Formal processes of participation deliberately create structures for children’s engagement in constructing meaning and sharing decision making.<sup>15</sup>

Rogert Hart’s “Ladder of Participation”, referenced to earlier in this paper, breaks down the different stages and types of children’s participation. Each rung of the ladder is a different level of participation, the bottom being the least amount of participation, and the highest being the ideal. Created as a tool to examine why and how children and young people participate in community, the ladder is not meant to be an almighty description of children’s participation, but rather a tool for individuals and organizations to measure children’s participation. Today, it is recognized that children’s participation goes much further beyond this model, but it remains a common reference for initial reflection.

The rungs of Roger Hart’s “Ladder of Participation include:

*Manipulation*, the lowest rung of the ladder refers to situations in which adults ask for children’s input or voice but then interpret and manipulate that information in a way to get the means they want.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Chawla, L. (2001). Evaluating children’s participation: Seeking areas of consensus. *PLA Notes*, 42, 9–13, IIED London

*Decoration*, when children are brought into a certain setting but do not actively participate. They probably don't understand the issues that are being addressed and adults don't pretend that they are inspired by children but insist on their presence.

*Tokenism*, refers to situations in which children are given a voice but do not choose the way in which they want to express themselves or be heard, it is the adult who chooses. Far too often, we witness tokenistic participation rather than natural children's participation.

The *assigned but informed* rung of the ladder includes a few elements, defined by Hart as:

1. The children understand the intention of the project;
2. They know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why;
3. They have a meaningful (rather than "decorative") role;
4. They volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them.

*Consulted and informed*, means that although adults run the situation, children have an active role in it and their opinions and voices are taken seriously.

*Adult initiated shared decisions with children* is considered to be true participation because children also partake in the decision making together with the adults.

*Child initiated and directed* projects are ones in which children come up with ideas and projects on their own and follow it through on their own.

*Child initiated shared decision with adults*, the highest rung of the ladder demonstrating true participation, is one in which children devise projects and ideas on their own and they share it with adults. Adults may then suggest or advise the children in their plans, but it remains a child-initiated project.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

# The Ladder of Participation

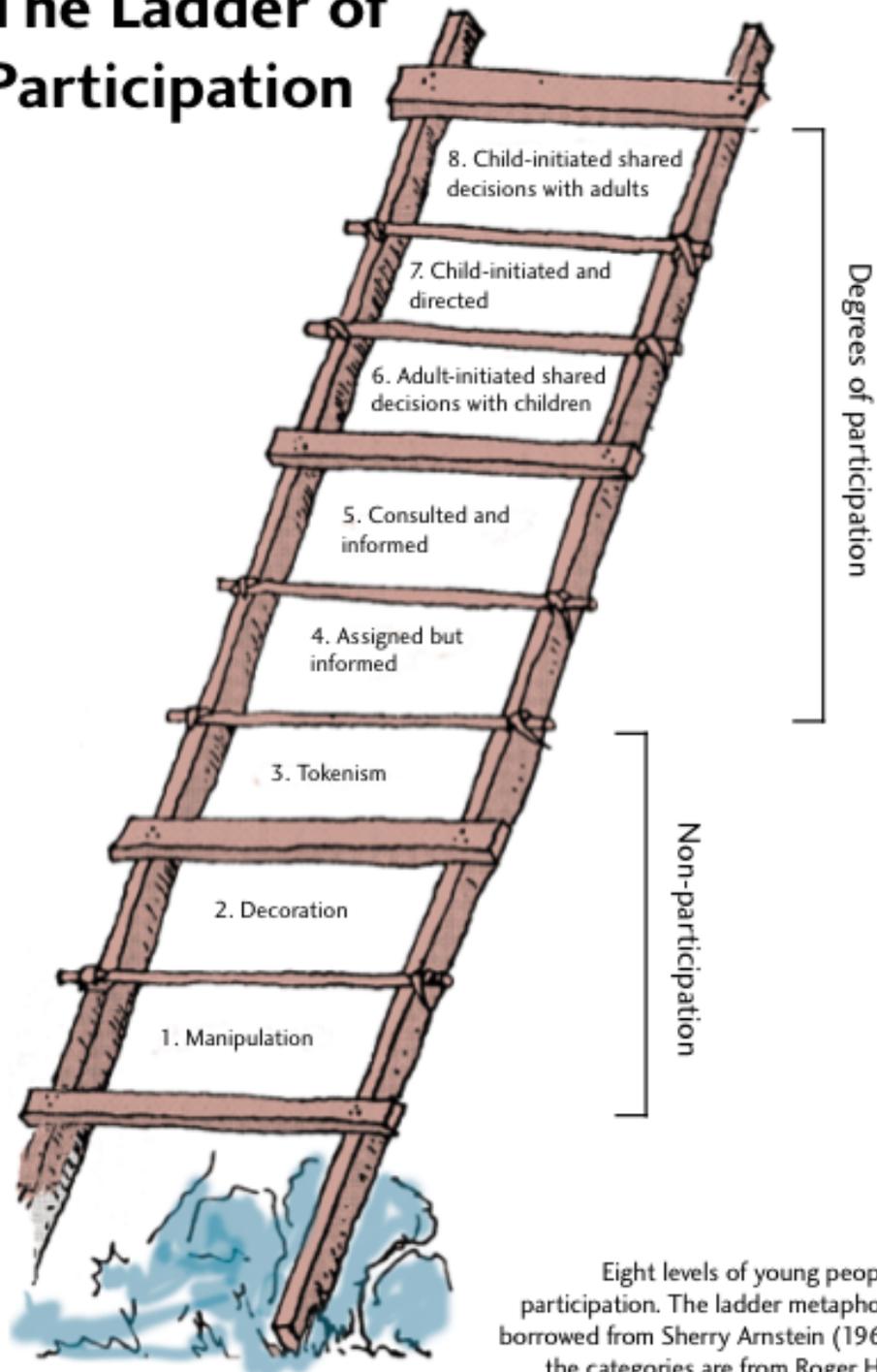


Figure 3. Roger Hart's "Ladder of Participation" (1992)

Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' has influenced many reflections not only on how to truly integrate child participation into society, but also, how to evaluate it. It should be noted, however, that Hart himself has stated that we have evolved beyond this ladder and cannot evaluate children's participation solely according to this concept. While there are key elements to take away from it, it is only one part of the puzzle and should not be considered as the holy theoretical representation of children's participation.

A World Vision Africa (2008) report provides another look at the different dimensions of children's participation. Aside from the level of engagement, there are many other elements to keep in mind. Young (2008) in the World Vision African report identifies the "Dimensions of children's participation", taken from Kirby, Lanyon & Sinclair (2004):

- **Level of participation:** degree of active engagement
- **Focus on decision-making:** personal or public decisions
- **Content of decision-making:** subject or sector concerned
- **Nature of participation activity:** type of process and activities
- **Frequency and duration of participation:** how often and for how long
- **Children and young people involved:** differing personal circumstances (age, sex, ethnicity, culture, disability, social and economic circumstances) and changing interests and capacities.<sup>17</sup>

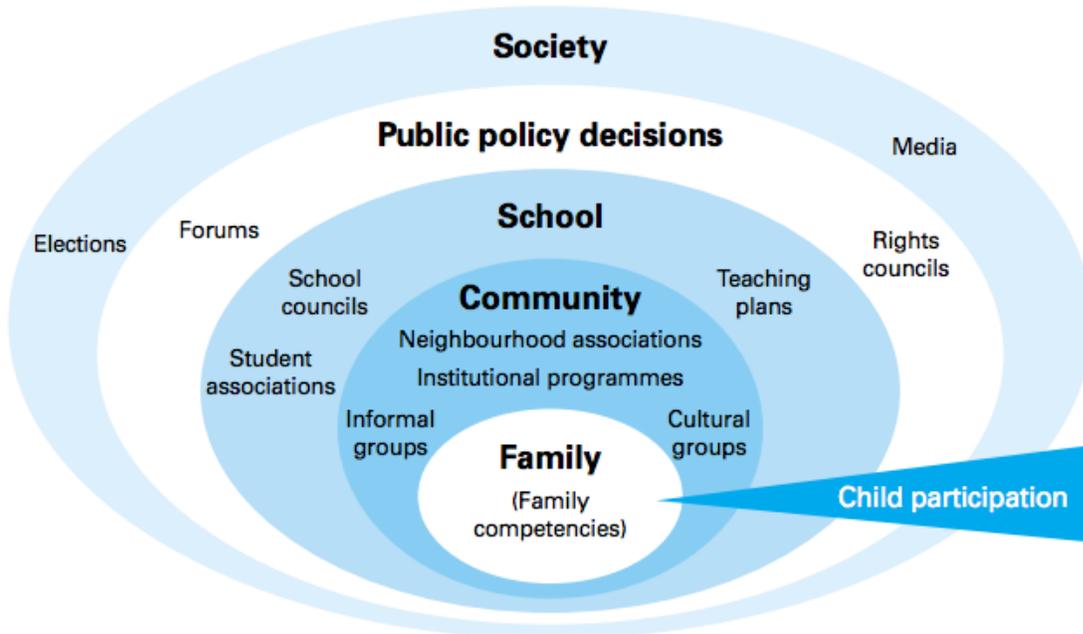
Aside from technical definitions, children's participation can be redefined everyday, within the home, in school, in public life, and elsewhere. Children are constantly participating in different ways and producing various outcomes. It is the responsibility of adults to create safe spaces for children to express themselves while also being protected.

UNICEF (2003) demonstrates the different levels, from the family to greater society, that children are part of and participate in:

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<sup>17</sup> Kirby, P., Lanyon, C., Cronin, K. & Sinclair R. (2003). Building a culture of participation: Involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation. Research Paper, Department for Education & Skills, United Kingdom In Young, H. (2008). *Puppets or Players? A Review of child participation approaches in Africa*. Nairobi: World Vision Africa

As children grow and develop, their opportunities for participation expand from private to public spaces, from local to global influence.



Adapted from R. Nimi's powerpoint presentation at UNICEF's Global Lifeskills Workshop in Salvador (Bahia), Brazil, June 2002.

**Figure 4. UNICEF's Representation of child participation<sup>18</sup>**

As children grow and become young people and then adults, there are many opportunities to participate and be active citizens in their world.

### **Benefits of children's participation**

As it becomes clearer what children's participation is or what it should be; there may still be a looming question: why does children's participation matter? For those out there who never really thought about it, or simply believe in the old saying "children should be seen but not heard", there are a multitude of explanations for how children's participation is beneficial, not only to the world around them, but to themselves as well. In the past, many people grew up in environments where adult authority always trumped what a child had to say, and many people continue to live with this mentality today. While adults do have more experience and knowledge than children, and much to

<sup>18</sup> UNICEF. (2003). *The state of the world's children 2003*. New York. p.3

teach them, the idea of mutual respect is of utmost importance if everyone's human rights are to be upheld.

As stated earlier, the UNCRC creates a precedent for children's basic human right to participate. Furthermore, children's participation is not only in the interest of children and young people themselves, but also equally to adults and society as a whole. White & Choudhury (2010) argue that children have specific knowledge about their lives and situations, which is an added value to solving issues concerning them and to leading to development.

This special knowledge that children are said to possess is the predominant justification for advocating their participation. This links into a broader set of arguments for participation in international development. The first is efficiency: that only if the beneficiaries are involved will appropriate and sustainable projects be designed. The second is efficacy: that when children speak for themselves in national and international meetings the impact is much greater than if the same argument were made by an adult on their behalf. The third is justice: that people have a right to speak on and be represented in matters that concern them (cf. UNCRC Article 12). The fourth, which Hart (2007: 2) terms self-realisation, claims that through participation children's self-confidence and capabilities will increase. Finally, participation is justified in more radical terms as leading to empowerment and transformation, whereby young people can challenge underlying structures of domination (p.65).<sup>19</sup>

Not only does children's participation benefit society and the development of it, but it is also vital for the child or young person themselves. Growing up is not easy. As our bodies grow, so does our perception of the world around us, and confronting these changes can be an obstacle for some, if not for most. It doesn't come out of nowhere that adolescents can seem at times awkward and shy; they are dealing with the emotional and physical changes happening to them and around them. But if children and young adults are given the opportunity to talk about the issues bothering them, to be a part of deciding their own fates, surely, they will transition into better adults.

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<sup>19</sup> White, S., & Choudhury, S. (2010). Children's participation in Bangladesh, Issues of agency and structures of violence. In *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation, Perspectives from Theory and Practice* (pp. 39-50). Abingdon: Routledge.

As a the UNICEF 2003 report on “The State of the World’s Children” explains:

...listening to the opinions of children does not mean simply endorsing their views. Rather, engaging them in dialogue and exchange allows them to learn constructive ways of influencing the world around them. The social give and take of participation encourages children to assume increasing responsibilities as active, tolerant and democratic citizens in formation (p.4).<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, if we really do listen to what children and young people have to say, we will see that they have interesting ideas and add great value to finding solutions to problems. We must move beyond seeing children and young people as passive citizens, but rather as competent partners.

UNICEF (2003) demonstrates the reasons why children’s participation is vital:

**Because...**A child whose active engagement with the world has been encouraged from the outset will be a child with the competencies to develop through early childhood, respond to educational opportunities and move into adolescence with confidence, assertiveness and the capacities to contribute to democratic dialogue and practices within the home, school, community and country.

**Because** children have proved that when they are involved, they can make a difference in the world around them...

**Because...** The values of democracy, such as respect for the rights and dignity of all people, for their diversity and their right to participate in the decisions that affect them, are first and best learned in childhood. Authentic, meaningful participation prepares children for their stake in the future.<sup>21</sup>

When given the opportunity, children have again and again proved that they are capable participants in society. As we will see further in this paper, there is an abundant number of examples

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<sup>20</sup> UNICEF. (2003). *The state of the world’s children 2003*. New York. Retrieved from: [www.unicef.org/sowc03/presskit/summary.html](http://www.unicef.org/sowc03/presskit/summary.html)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

of children participating in their local communities to improve their own lives and those around them.

To highlight other benefits of children's participation, Hart (1992) demonstrates "the development of social competence and social responsibility" through participation. If children take part in a local project, for example, they start to find their own role and place in that project, in their community, and in a larger sense, in society. The stakes go up for them when they have been part of something hands on. "...it is useful, whenever trying to express the value of participation to more conservative thinkers, to explain that the involvement of young people in projects leads to a sense of responsibility for the maintenance and protection of those products which were created (p.34-35)."<sup>22</sup>

There are many pressing issues that trouble the world today, and many of them affect children, either directly or indirectly. If we think about some of the biggest problems that ail the world today; war, hunger, poverty; children are often among the many, if not first, victims who are affected. With their input and help, these issues can be addressed in a more holistic, equal, and efficient way.

A Plan Report prepared by Hart, Newman, Ackermann and with Freeny (2004), identifies four realms of children's participation impacts, with varying aspects of change. These include:

### **1. Impacts at the personal level**

- Self-confidence
- Useful knowledge
- Acquisition of life skills
- Personal Development
- Social Development
- Positive channel for energy and creativity

### **2. Impacts at the family level**

- Greater parental support and less abuse
- Enhanced status within the family
- Greater social freedom, particularly for girls

### **3. Impacts at the community level**

- Peer Solidarity
- Community awareness and concern for children's issues

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<sup>22</sup> Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

- Improved status of children within the community
- Enhanced community development

#### **4. Impacts at the institutional level**

- Improvements in schooling
- Enhanced processes and institutions of governance
- Better functioning of agencies

The amount of literature-supporting children's participation is endless, and yet we continue to learn more about the impacts and benefits as time passes and new experiences highlight new developments.

## **1.2 Children's Participation Upholds Democracy**

We live in a world where the progress and successes of a country and its leaders are often measured by the level of existing democracy. Democracy, a concept which has evolved over time, has some essential elements which include deliberative processes and participation. Whether democracy is the best measurement of progress and equality is for the reader to decide on his/her own. Here we propose that democracy, in its most ideal form, when uncorrupt and just, is a valid system for progress to occur in a society.

Although the concept of 'democracy' contains many elements, an essential one that makes it different from numerous other political systems, is the idea of an inclusive system in which citizens can play an active role. A democratic system is not perfect by any means; however, it does provide a system in which ideally all participants of a society can partake. Rajesh Tandon (2008) examines participation, citizenship, and democracy and provides valid points for why democracy and participation go hand in hand.

Despite many democratic deficits in the forms and practices of governance at national (as well as global levels) today, democracy continues to offer the best potential for human development in future, however. Therefore, linking participation to democracy can add the energy and creativity of all citizens, not just those few who are elected or appointed to public offices (p.293).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Tandon, R. (2008). Participation, citizenship and democracy: Reflections on 25 years' of PRIA.

Therefore, a key element of democracy is the idea of participation. As the UNDP “Human Development Report 2002” makes clear, “democratic participation is an end of human development, not just a means of achieving it... and [there is] the need to ‘deepen democracy’, to foster democracy that is more inclusive and responsive (p. 1).”<sup>24</sup> A democracy simply cannot be what it is without the participation of citizens and the inclusion of everyone, no matter their age.

Furthermore, while many countries already claim to be democratic, or are in the process of democratizing, many are still very far from realistically implementing democratic processes and including their populations in the judicial, electoral, and social processes. With the uprising seen in the past 5 years around the world, one notices that in many cases, protests and rebellions, as well as their documentation, are being lead by young people. From the Arab spring, to protests in China, to activists involved in Occupy Wall Street, the majority of these people are young, competent and frustrated individuals, who want a more inclusive and shared decision-making society.

In some of these counties, and in many others that have yet to take timid steps towards democracy—the result is an increasingly alienated and angry population, especially young people (foreward).<sup>25</sup>

This begs the question, why aren’t governments doing more to promote participative democracies? And why aren’t they focusing in particular on the world’s younger population? Children who feel involved in their societies from an early age, are individuals who will grow up respecting their views and those of others, and will help to shape society for future generations. UNICEF (2003) states:

Democracy is something children learn as they develop from infancy through adolescence... A child whose active engagement with the world has been encouraged from the outset will be a child and citizen of the world who is more likely to value his or her own opinion and beliefs, and the opinions and beliefs of others.<sup>26</sup>

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*Community Development Journal*, 43(3), 284-296.

<sup>24</sup> UNDP. (2002). *Human development report 2002: Deepening democracy in a fragmented world*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>25</sup> UNDP. (2002). *Human development report 2002: Deepening democracy in a fragmented world*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>26</sup> UNICEF. (2003). *The state of the world’s children 2003*. New York. p. 14

As the writers of the UNICEF report (2003) explain, children who have grown up in such an environment will be better prepared and capable of addressing the problems, inequities and injustices that they have inherited. These children and young people will be ready to advance the democratic principles that world leaders have embraced.<sup>27</sup> Together with adults, young people, and children, our societies will be able to become more democratic and just and hopefully a better place for everyone to live in dignity and comfort.

Reddy and Ratna (2002), further argue for children's participation in democracy claiming, "the right and the ability to advocate on one's own behalf, to be in control and to be a part of decision making processes and interventions. This form of participation of children and youth enhances the concept of civil society participation and strengthens democratic processes (p. 4)."<sup>28</sup>

The idea of partnerships between people of all ages for the benefit of democracy is nothing new. Perhaps the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been witness to new events that promote and encourage these approaches more than ever before, however. As Hart (1992) argues in his writings about children's participation, "productive collaboration between the young and the old should be the core of any democratic society wishing to improve itself, while providing continuity between the past, the present, and the future (p.39)."<sup>29</sup>

If we are to work towards establishing more just democracies, we cannot ignore the partners we need in order to achieve this; children need to be involved in democratization. If we are to uphold democracy to its ideal, then we need to include all of society's citizens. As Hart (1992) justly states,

"A nation is democratic to the extent to which its citizens are involved, particularly at the community level. The confidence and competence to be involved must be gradually acquired through practice. It is for this reason that there should be gradually increasing opportunities for children to participate in any aspiring democracy, and particularly in those nations already convinced that they are democratic (p.6)."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 14

<sup>28</sup> Reddy, N. & Ratna, K. (2002). *A Journey in Children's Participation*. Bangalore: The Concerned for Working Children. p. 4

<sup>29</sup> Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

Further, children need to understand their rights and how they can be active citizens in democracy. It is their right and in their interest. Lansdown, (2001) explains, “what is needed is the development of participatory processes in all institutional settings with children to promote their understanding that these settings are what democracy is actually about – that democracy means more than the election of a national government (p.6).” For participation to be truly participatory it needs to include all citizens in decision-making, and take into account everyone’s opinions, including those of children and young people.

### **Participatory Democracy and Participatory Development**

Thus far we have seen that participation is a key to democracy and that for a democracy to be truly effective it needs to be inclusive. This idea of inclusiveness and democracy is also highly connected to development. Participatory development has transformed the work of governments, NGOs and anyone working within the field of development. In addition, reflections on how democracy and development are linked has been a focus of the government and civil society.

If we try and trace back the evolution of democracy in the Modern Era, we come faced with the question of why there was a need to create such a form of government. In humans’ search to understand how we can best develop, many countries decided to adopt a democratic system. And yet, the question of whether a democracy is the best institution for development, has often been debated.

In the years immediately following World War II, there was a belief (articulated for instance, in Paul Samuelson’s classic textbook) in a tradeoff between democracy and growth. The Soviet Union, it was argued, had grown faster than the countries of the West, but in order to do so had jettisoned basic democratic rights. Later, with the enormous success of the East Asian economies in the 1960s and 1970s, the lack of full participatory democracy in many of the successful countries was once again seen as reflecting these tradeoffs.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Stiglitz, J. (2002). Participation and Development: Perspectives from the Comprehensive Development Paradigm. *Review of Development Economics*, 6(2), 163-182.

There have been extensive reflections on whether democracy and growth should go hand in hand, and while there have been enough examples to prove that they don't always, there have been many that also demonstrate that a democratic system can and often does lead to development. Therefore "countries can strive for openness and participation without the fear that it will hamper development."<sup>32</sup> This concept of including participation in development has also been highly debated, and now globally accepted as a functional approach. If countries claim to be democratic, then they should prove to their citizens to be inclusive, participatory, and uncorrupt. Including more citizens, including children in different processes challenges the governments and holds it more accountable.

In addressing the issues, it's crucial to first understand what is we mean by "development". Development may be seen in simple terms as positive historical and long-term change. The World Bank often equates development with economic growth. On the other hand, many international NGOs and humanitarian institutions, believe development to be the alleviation of poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The UNDP's first Human Development Report (1990) opens with the following statement on development:

*People are the real wealth of a nation. The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to live long, healthy and creative lives.*

Development overall then is the means by which we improve living standards and society. Economist Amartya Sen, whose research lead to the creation of the Human Development Index (HDI), later expanded the understanding of development in the late 90s to not only include income and access to public institutions, but also a persons freedom as the means to development (Center for Global Development). For our purposes in terms of children's participation, it's important to mention that there is also an aspect of the development of the child, developing their skills, self-confidence, and capacities. Understanding the elements of development is crucial, as well as reflecting on how development happens.

In order for development to occur and be sustainable, citizens needs to be included in the structures and processes that work towards improving our society. Therefore participation plays a key role in development. According to some theories, the concept of participation truly became a part of 'development' at the end of World War II as well as with the decolonization of Africa, Asia,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid

and Latin America.<sup>33</sup> After the Second World War, the idea of “development” also became a way to distinguish between those countries that were ‘developed’ and those that were ‘developing’.

This pronouncement [the philosophy of ‘development’ propounded by Truman] at once created the duality of developed and developing (its more complex articulations into ‘least developed’ etc made it even more problematic) countries—a sort of division into economic and political camps which still continues in some ways, even after six decades. It also established that the ‘American’ (western so to say) model of development was the most desirable for the rest of humanity (p.286).<sup>34</sup>

This also created the precedent that if a country was developed it automatically meant that it had the expertise to share with developing countries and that the model approach would be one already established by developed countries, i.e. the Western world. Tandon (2008) explains that in this way, a top-down approach emerged in the world of development by the 1950s, in which governments and international NGOs held most of the power, while the voices of local populations, could hardly be seen. Small grassroots efforts were of course still thriving during this time, but not in the limelight. Seeing as those at the top often didn’t have full reach to those at the bottom, local communities worked in parallel in order to address the issues that were left unresolved.

As evidence from the ground began to gather by late 1960s, it began to become clear that all was not well with this dominant model of top-down, expert-led development. There were issues of inappropriateness, sustainability, local ownership and wastage of resources. It was in reviewing this evidence that subaltern, micro experiments in community participation were first ‘noticed’ by policy-makers and development experts (p.288).<sup>35</sup>

It should also be noted that the evolution of the notion of community participation went hand in hand with community development. Some even consider the two to be essentially the same thing, while others argue that community participation is part of community development but not exactly the same. Abott (1995) demonstrates how three strands of thinking on community participation and community development evolved:

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<sup>33</sup> Tandon, R. (2008). Participation, citizenship and democracy: Reflections on 25 years' of PRIA. *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), 284-296.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

In the first, community development is superseded by a more appropriate form of community participation (de Kadt, 1982). In the second, it is still the view that "community development and community participation are basically the same [but that] community development has gone out of fashion and been re-invented as community participation" (Sheng, 1990:57). The third strand is that wherein community development is recognised as a form of participation, but there are different, and contradictory, views of its application (eg. Jones and Wiggle, 1987; Ekong and Sekoya, 1982; Waseem, 1982) (p.158).<sup>36</sup>

This clearly proves an evolving reflection on the connection between participation and development. So as participation became a more important aspect of development, so did reflections on children's participation. "Many governments (the Indian government takes the lead in this regard) launched special programs entitled 'empowerment'; most common of these were for women; and children were not forgotten either (p.289)."<sup>37</sup> Progressively, as participation began to gain ground in development projects, so too did the concept of including children and young people in making positive changes in their communities.

### **Children and Young People as a Driving Force of Development**

Why might children and young people drive development? If we think about it rationally, who could understand the complexities and difficulties of their own lives better than that person themselves? If we want to understand how to make a school better, why not ask the children what they would want to do? If we want to help a community in which a large portion of the population is children and young people, wouldn't they have ideas too about how to improve it simply because they live there and know it better than any outsider?

The International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICD) in a report on "Child Participation Promoting Social Change" (2004) argues that "increasingly, across various child rights issues from HIV/AIDS to education, development agencies are making a conceptual shift from

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<sup>36</sup> Abbott, J. (1995). Community participation and its relationship to Community Development. *Community Development Journal*, 30(2), 158-168. \*Sources in quote in bibliography

<sup>37</sup> Tandon, R. (2008). Participation, citizenship and democracy: Reflections on 25 years' of PRIA. *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), 284-296.

thinking that child and youth problems are the principal barrier to development, to valuing children's active participation as the most effective strategy for the prevention of children's problems (p.12-13).” Further, children's participation goes beyond helping solve problems that affect them directly, and expands out to numerous issues that affect their communities and regions.

Children and young people are all around us, in the institutions that exist, in different communities, and they are living their own experiences and many want to share them with others. Steinar Siversten, former Chair of Plan's International Board, talks about witnessing first hand the expertise that children have. He states (2004):

...it is the children involved themselves who are the real experts on the realities for child soldiers or children left as orphans when their parents die from AIDS...The last 10 years have seen the development of many innovative activities, such as children's media programs and peer education groups. The inclusion of children and young people in community development processes is also slowly gaining ground.<sup>38</sup>

Hart (2004) argues that in the development field, there is a growing discussion about the benefits of children's participation in terms of project effectiveness.

Despite the consensus among many organizations that children and young people should be involved in community development, implementing this has been much harder. In this day and age, many organizations simply aren't equipped with the proper methods to safely include children's participation. However, we are starting to see more changes towards accounting for children, young people and their participation in community development.

While communities have much to gain from the involvement of their youngest residents, these children and young people also have a lot to get in return. Plan (2004) explains that as they become more involved and sense a greater responsibility for their actions and results, so too do adults and the community become more aware of what the children and young people are and can add to the community. Since the children and young people address issues in their own way and in relation to their own experiences, adults get a new perspective and learn from them too.

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<sup>38</sup> Hart, J., Newman, J., & Ackermann, L., with Freeny, T. (prepared by), (2004). *Children Changing Their World. Understanding and Evaluating Children's Participation in Development*, Surrey: Plan

Plan's International Report (2004) on Children Changing Their World puts things in perspective: "Awareness campaigns conducted by child-led groups give adult community members the opportunity to become more informed about and involved in challenges confronting children in their communities (p.27)."<sup>39</sup> In this way, adults come to respect the children and young people in a new way and support them and create a space in which everyone can thrive and work together to improve communities.

Overall, this creates far more effective work because the skills and expertise of various community members are utilized, using the differences in age as an advantage. All of these different elements create a continuous circle of betterment of communities and society. Children and young people 's voices are heard, they become more active participants in their communities, adults give them more responsibilities and trust, which in turn makes the children and young people have more trust in the adults, and eventually, all parties begin to work together in a more efficient and productive way.

Taken from experiences in different countries, Plan's International Report (2004) describes such events:

Children, parents, and agency staff all indicated that projects often had a profound effect on community life. They provided a model of well-functioning social body and encouraged the development of positive values such as inclusiveness and non-discrimination. According to some children, setting a positive example for their communities has served to enhance community participation in development initiatives generally...(p.29).<sup>40</sup>

An increasing number of agencies, organizations, and individuals are starting to accept the benefits of children's participation in development. Some have even used the term "stakeholders" when defending children and young people's participation in development initiatives. In "Working with children as stakeholders in development: the challenges of organisational change", the authors explain that "applying the notion of stakeholderhood to young people entails consideration of issues of maturity and competence (p.333)."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it's time we considered children and young people as

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Hart, J., Paludan, M., Steffen, L., & O'donoghue, G. (2011). Working with children as

true stakeholders in society and recognized their potential to be a driving force in development and in improving society.

As we work towards improving democracy and increased development, let's not push aside part of the world's population, children and young people, who are competent partners with a lot to offer. Including children and young people in participation and development would be to everyone's advantage.

A UNDP Youth Strategy 2014-2017 highlights the importance of children's participation in development:

“From a development perspective, the involvement of young men and women in participatory processes and planning and policymaking at all levels plays a pivotal role. It ensures that their rights are promoted and that their voices are heard, that inter-generational knowledge is shared, and that innovation and critical thinking are encouraged at all ages to support transformational change in people's lives and communities... Valuable resources that can contribute to the advancement and quality of development are lost or underutilized when young men and women are excluded from or insufficiently engaged in formal decision-making processes and institutions (p.17).<sup>42</sup>

In order to understand how to include children in participation and development, it's important to trace back the roots of children's rights and children's participation. The context of children's rights clarifies the concept of children's participation and underlines it's importance.

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stakeholders in development: The challenges of organisational change. *Development in Practice*, 21(3), 330-342.

<sup>42</sup> UNDP. (2014). *Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future. UNDP Youth Strategy 2014-2017*. New York.

## **2. Children's Participation Based on Children's Rights**

### **2.1 The evolution of Children's Rights**

Children's rights have been an issue of concern for far longer than it has officially been publicized. Surely even before there was any literature about it or any declarations, people were fighting for children's rights, and especially for their protection. Starting in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, international NGOs and institutions began to take a closer interest in children's rights and so began a series of declarations on the rights of the child. Specific individuals also played a key role in bringing more attention to this issue.

Janusz Korczak, a Polish doctor, pedagogue and children's author, now famous for his work with children, was inventing new ways of letting children participate in society in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and up until his death during the Second World War. He wrote numerous books on children's rights and other related subjects. "He is best remembered for setting up an orphanage in the Polish ghetto during the Second World War and in 1942 insisting on accompanying the children in his care to their deaths in the Treblinka extermination camp (Foreward).<sup>43</sup>

His work with children was radical in many ways for the times. In his orphanage he created a children's court where children and adults alike could be heard and judged based on the rules that had been established together.

One of Korczak's final books was published in 1929 under the visionary title of *The Child's Right to Respect*, and included a proclamation that is just as radical now as it was 80 years ago:

Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect.<sup>44</sup>

Korczak continues to be an important reference for children's participation. As literature on this subject continues to be written, his theories continue to be relevant.

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<sup>43</sup> Percy-Smith, B., & Thomas, N. (Eds.). (2010). *A handbook of children and young people's participation: Perspectives from theory and practice*. London: Routledge.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

Around the same time that Korczak was running his orphanage, international NGOs and institutions started to also take note of the need for an official statement on children's rights. In 1924, the Declaration of Geneva, also known as the first Declaration on the Rights of the Child, was the culmination of efforts by various NGOs and individuals to bring children's rights to the forefront.

NGOs were involved in the internationalisation of the children's rights movement from as early as the 1920s. Save the Children Fund, under the leadership of Eglantyne Jebb, and the International Council of Women were pivotal in the adoption of the 1924 Declaration of Geneva...(p.36).<sup>45</sup>

After this first international institutional step to address children's rights, more supporting official documents soon followed. Notably, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as an official documents protecting the rights of all people, despite their age, sex, ethnicity, etc., is also representative of children's rights. Yet, it wasn't until 1989, and the UNCRC, that the concept of children's rights to have a voice and to be taken seriously came about. Before this, it was more of a matter of protection of children and the right to education.<sup>46</sup>

Key milestones on children's rights leading up to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child include:

**1924:** The League of Nations endorses the first Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

**1945:** The UN Charter urges nations to encourage and promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

**1948:** The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly, recognises children's rights by stating that "all human beings are born free in dignity and rights" and that motherhood and children were entitled to special care and protection.

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<sup>45</sup> OHCHR-Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2007). *Legislative History of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Volume 1, HR/PUB/07/1. New York/Geneva: United Nations. In Turkelli, G., & Vandenhole, W. (2012). *The Convention on the Rights of the Child: Repertoires of NGO Participation*. *Human Rights Law Review*, 12, 33-64.

<sup>46</sup> Percy-Smith, B., & Thomas, N. (Eds.). (2010). *A handbook of children and young people's participation: Perspectives from theory and practice*. London: Routledge.

**1948:** The General Assembly adopts a second Declaration of the Rights of the Child, a brief seven-point statement that built on the 1924 Declaration. It stated that “... men and women of all nations, recognising that mankind owes to the child the best that it has to give, declare and accept it as their duty to meet this obligation in all respects.....”

**1959:** A more detailed third Declaration of the Rights of the Child is adopted by the General Assembly.

**1961:** The international legal framework is strengthened further with the adoption of two International Covenants – on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Political Rights. These two covenants entered into force in 1976 and provided a moral as well as legal obligation of states to respect the human rights of each individual.

**1989:** Adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its entry into force in 1990.<sup>47</sup>

Although it took some time to finally have a Convention adopted by countries around the world, and one which took into account many different factors of children’s rights, it is seen today as a crucial step and milestone, as well as a trampoline for children’s participation in society.

In addition, the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children (UNGASS) held in 2002 was a huge milestone in promoting children’s rights and participation. In the buildup to the Special Session, advocacy organizations including UNICEF, initiated the Global Movement for Children (GMC) which brought together young people and adults to start reflections together, including the Say Yes for Children Campaign with 10 imperatives to make the world more fit for children.<sup>48</sup> At UNGASS, for the first time, children and young people came as official delegates to converse with 69 world leaders, 190 national delegations, over 1,500 representatives from NGOs, and 600 child delegates.

The UNICEF (2002) report states how “for the first time ever, young people addressed the

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<sup>47</sup> The United Nations. (1992). *Adopted from Teaching about human rights*. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/children/children.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> 1. Leave no child out 2. Put children first 3. Care for every child 4. Fight HIV/AIDS 5. Stop harming and exploiting children 6. Listen to children 7. Educate every child 8. Protect children from war 9. Protect the earth for children 10. Fight poverty: Invest in children from UNICEF (2002) The United Nations Special Assembly Session on Children

General Assembly on their own behalf, offering bold ideas and creative solutions. Their presence generated excitement, determination and commitment. World leaders learned first-hand that to change the world *for* children they must change the world *with* children (p.2).” Kofi Annan himself stated: “This is not just a Special Session on children. It is a gathering about the future of humanity.”

Thirteen years after the UNCRC was adopted, UNGASS was another milestone in children’s right and children’s participation. To better understand the impact of UNGASS, we first need to understand the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### **United Nations Convention on the Rights on the Child (CRC)**

When we talk about children’s issues, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a constant source of reference. This is a key document, adopted in 1989, entered in to force in 1990, and ratified by 191 countries. “CRC is an international human rights treaty created with the goal of realising all rights of children everywhere. It has been ratified by virtually the entire community of nations (p.1).”<sup>49</sup> It took an incredibly long time for children’s rights to be considered a real issue in countries around the world. What makes the UNCRC unique is that it not only addresses issues such as the protection, education, and health of children, that had been addressed in previous conventions, but also the right for children to speak their opinions and have them listened to.

...the Convention on the Rights of the Child... [is] intended to bind people in every country and of every culture and every religion to work to ensure that all the world’s children enjoy the rights they deserve - to survival, health and education; to a caring family environment, to play and culture; to protection from exploitation and abuse of all kinds and to have their voices heard and opinions taken into account on issues affecting their lives (p.2-3).<sup>50</sup>

Reddy and Ratna (2002) believe that the CRC may be divided into three areas of focus, what they call “the three P’s”. The articles concerning the protection of children, those related to the provision of services to children and those concerning participation or the recognition of children as political beings with both civil and political rights.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Reddy, N. & Ratna, K. (2002). *A Journey in Children’s Participation*. Bangalore: The Concerned for Working Children.

In terms of children's participation, Articles 12 through 15 are of particular interest to us. In addition, there are articles that address citizenship and civil rights and freedoms.

Children's civil rights and freedoms

In addition to the general principles of the UNCRC (non-discrimination- Article 2, best interests- Article 3, right to life- Article 6, and children's participation- Article 12), there are eight articles related directly to civil rights and freedoms of children:

- Name and nationality (Article 7)
- Preservation of identity (Article 8)
- Freedom of expression (Article 13)
- Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14)
- Freedom of association and of peaceful assembly (article 15)
- Protection of privacy (Article 16)
- Access to appropriate information (Article 17)
- The right to not be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 37 (a)).

**Figure 5. Children's civil rights and freedoms**<sup>52</sup>

Article 12 is of specific interest in terms of children's participation because it refers to a child's "right to express views freely, and the right to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child (Foreward)."<sup>53</sup> In addition, "Articles 13, 14, 15, and 16, which give the children the right to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, rights to peacefully assemble and rights to privacy, are of particular importance. These rights are carefully qualified by recognition of the duties of parents to provide direction to the child, in accordance with child's 'age and maturity' and 'evolving capacities (Foreward)."<sup>54</sup>

These key aspects of the CRC are what uphold a child's right to participation and have been the supporting documents for organizations and individuals fighting to protect these rights. Governments who have signed the UNCRC now need to be held accountable to it and uphold children's citizenship and participation.

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<sup>52</sup> Jaap Doek in foreword to A Invernizzi and J Williams (eds) *Children and Citizenship*, SAGE Publications, 2008, p xvi. In Save the Children. Written by O'Kane, C. (2013). *Child Right's Governance. Pushing the Boundaries: A guide to increasing the realization of children's civil rights and freedoms*. Child Rights Governance Global Initiative, Save the Children.

<sup>53</sup> Percy-Smith, B., & Thomas, N. (Eds.). (2010). *A handbook of children and young people's participation: Perspectives from theory and practice*. London: Routledge.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

Furthermore, in the past 30 years since the CRC was adopted, there have been changes in government's attitudes and progress has been made. There is still much more work to be done, but positive transformations are coming out of this Convention and we will hopefully see continued development on the front of children's rights and participation in society, in part due to this key document. Youth parliaments exist in many countries today, as well as child-led organizations. Many countries have set up Ministries, Councils, Commissions, and Committees to work on children's issues, and some countries now have children's ombudspersons, who investigate the way in which children are being treated. We are seeing progress when it comes to defending children's rights.

Virtually all governments that have ratified the CRC have passed local legislation – where this did not exist previously – which stresses the rights of children and provides a legal basis to realise those rights. A number of countries have also modified their constitutions to incorporate the principles of the CRC into every aspect of national law.<sup>55</sup>

The UNCRC has been a huge stepping-stone for national, regional, and local governments to work from, and also a way for them to be held accountable. NGOs and experts constantly refer back to the Convention when pressing on the issue of children's rights to participate in society.

### **Children in Governance- Youth Parliaments**

If we want to take children seriously this means truly listening to what they have to say and seeing them as competent participants, even sometimes when it comes to decision-making on a higher level. "Promoting the Convention on the Rights of the Child is also about children participating in decisions affecting their lives (p.4)."<sup>56</sup> Allowing children to be more active in democracy is a big step to acknowledging them as competent partners. Headway has been made on this front; indeed, today we can find numerous examples of Children's Parliaments that have been created in order to allow for children and young people to participate further in political decision-making and government.

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<sup>55</sup> The United Nations. (1992). *Adopted from Teaching about human rights*. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/children/children.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

To understand how children can meaningfully participate in democracy and decision-making, we need to breakdown the different kinds of approaches that exist. Lansdown's UNICEF report (2001) on "Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision-Making" explains:

Meaningful approaches to involving children can be broadly grouped into three categories, although these are far from being mutually exclusive and the boundaries are rarely clear cut. They are introduced here primarily to help conceptualize the type of work being described:

- Consultative processes – in which adults initiate processes to obtain information from children through which they can improve legislation, policies or services;
- Participative initiatives – where the aim is to strengthen processes of democracy, create opportunities for children to understand and apply democratic principles or involve children in the development of services and policies that impact on them;
- Promoting self advocacy – where the aim is to empower children to identify and fulfill their own goals and initiatives (p.16).<sup>57</sup>

These different categories of approaches are used in different projects around the world. Examples of children participating in democratic processes can be found within this different consultative, participative, and self advocacy processes.

Children and Youth Parliaments are a wonderful example of how citizenship for children is taken to a new level. However there are still many children who do not participate in such initiatives and the question of why still remains. Are children not as interested in being part of democratic processes or do they simply not know how or if they can? These questions are hard to answer but as monitoring and evaluation methods evolve, so too does it become clearer what the indicators are. Potentially, as children's participation is more widely accepted, more children will feel comfortable to participate.

Despite the fact that not all children participate when given the opportunity, there are still many who do. Numerous examples of children's parliaments and participation in governance can be given. The following are just a few examples of such initiatives:

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<sup>57</sup> Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting Children's Participation in democratic Decision-Making*. UNICEF, Innocenti Insight: UNICEF

**Children’s Parliament in Slovenia:** Established in 1990, children get to discuss on different topics (chosen by them each year) and learn more about them in their schools. “Over 100 young people aged between 13-15 years are elected through their schools to meet at the Slovenian Parliament to discuss this issue [varied issues] (Lansdown, 2001, p.18).” After the conflicts in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia, children expressed their concerns and reflected on how to improve the situation. Some concerns and fears presented by the children in a report with recommendations were taken by politicians to the Parliament for further reflection.<sup>58</sup>

**Funky Dragon Welsh Youth Parliament:** Funky Dragon was unfortunately closed as of October, 2014, because of lack of funding from the Welsh government, after 12 years running. During that time they had a mission of enabling children and young people in Wales in decision-making and making their voices heard by the government. Through a Grand Council, made up of children and adults, young people in Wales voices their opinions at a national level through elected representatives.<sup>59</sup>

**Children’s Parliament in Zimbabwe:** Zimbabwe has an annual Children’s Parliament that meets once a year to discuss an annual theme chosen by the OAU (Organization of African Unity) each year. Children from primary and secondary school are chosen as delegates for the children’s parliament through a series of contests.<sup>60</sup>

**Youth Councils in France:** several hundred youth councils have been created in France since they began working in the 1970s. They are very functional and have brought about some significant initiatives including the creation of spaces for disabled children, libraries, improved transport, and more. Youth participate in the councils to voice their opinions about issues in their communities.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Verhellen, E. (Ed.) (1996). *Monitoring children’s rights*.(pp. 627-636). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. In Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting Children’s Participation in democratic Decision-Making*. UNICEF, Innocenti Insight: UNICEF

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.funkydragon.org/en/about-us/organisation-structure/>

<sup>60</sup> Save the Children, 2000, *Our Right to be Heard: Voices from Child Parliamentarians in Zimbabwe*, London In Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting Children’s Participation in democratic Decision-Making*. UNICEF, Innocenti Insight: UNICEF.

<sup>61</sup> Hear! Hear! C. Willow, Local Government Information Unit, London 1997. In Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting Children’s Participation in democratic Decision-Making*. UNICEF, Innocenti Insight: UNICEF

While there are many other youth parliament examples, these are just a few which give a taste of the work that children and young people around the world are doing on national levels to influence their governments and be active participants in decision-making.

## **2.2 Resistance to Children's Participation**

While there are many individuals and organizations that fight to promote children's participation in society, there are however, many cases of resistance to it as well. The reasons for resistance to children's participation vary. When addressing this question, it's important to know that some reasons are individual and sometimes private, while others increase to an organizational and institutional level. Let's first address the reasons pertaining to individuals themselves.

Accepting children as active participants in society also means that adults have to accept giving up some of their own authority, power, and control. This is not so easy for everyone to do, even for those who sincerely believe in children's participation. West (2007) examines the difficulties that adults may have with giving up power.

It [children's participation] takes time, it questions and dissipates adult power, and it diminishes adult control. The form that activities might take—perhaps loud, with laughter, and perhaps messy with paint and paper—can symbolize how participation might appear as uncontrollable to adults. Also, children making decisions means that adults do not already know what will happen, which introduces a degree of uncertainty. Most importantly, children may raise direct challenges to adults' actions...(p.124-5).<sup>62</sup>

Once adults are ready to give up the control and authority that they are used to, steps towards meaningful children's participation can begin. Andy West (2007) describes the way in which childhood is perceived in Southeast Asia, but also applies it to childhood and children in general.

Childhood is constructed—perceived, defined and described—as a period of dependence conflated with an idea of innocence. In Southeast Asia it is often said that children are white cloths or blank sheets to be inscribed upon, or empty vessels waiting to be filled. In other

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<sup>62</sup> West, A. (2007). Power Relationships and Adult Resistance to Children's Participation. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 17(1), 123-135.

contexts, childhood may be constructed as a period where children are wild, untamed or self-willed. In either case, adults perceive that children are to be taught and controlled (p.126).<sup>63</sup>

These cultural perceptions that people have of childhood and a child's place in the home, in public, in school, and other places, all play a role in hindering true meaningful participation. West (2007) defines "meaningful" as "participation that enables children to positively impact their own lives, rather than negative, tokenistic appearances and events, or the manipulation of children to fulfill adult agendas (p.126)."<sup>64</sup> So it seems that at times, the acceptance of children's participation is superficial and not representative of what it should be.

It may even happen that those organizations working on children's participation themselves have trouble implementing participation within their organizations. This is not because of any lack of sincerity, but rather because they don't always know how to do so or how to demonstrate meaningful participation. They may be practicing adult led participation rather than sharing the responsibilities with the children and young people.

In order for children's participation to be truly implemented on an institutional level, there needs to be significant organizational change, and yet there is resistance to it because it means using a new system and restructuring. We have discussed cultural aspects of childhood perspectives and individual perceptions; however there hasn't been much discussion about the perspectives of organizations themselves. "...the values and practices of the organisations seeking to promote participation are rarely considered (p.331)."<sup>65</sup> As it turns out, cultural aspects also need to be taken into account as well as structural ones in an organization when it comes to child participation resistance.

On one hand, an organisation's procedures inevitably reflect its 'culture'. On the other hand, it is also clearly the case that certain procedures can reinforce particular attitudes and dispositions, even to the point of making them appear as self-evident 'truths'. For example, the exclusion of certain categories of people – such as children, women, 'local staff' – from decision-making processes on the grounds of assumed lack of relevant competence may

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> Hart, J., Paludan, M., Steffen, L., & O'donoghue, G. (2011). Working with children as stakeholders in development: The challenges of organisational change. *Development in Practice*, 330-342.

become routinised to the point where it is not questioned. At the same time, the authority of certain other categories of people to make important decisions comes to be seen as beyond contestation, as ‘natural’ even, given the assumption that they possess precisely the competence that others lack (p.336).<sup>66</sup>

Hart, Paludan, Steffen, and O’Donogue (2011) explain that if children are to be considered as real stakeholders, it’s necessary for organizations to change not only their structures, but also their values and cultures. In order to help organizations implement children’s participation, toolkits and methods to do so have been created and spaces towards achieving new structures have been provided.

As much resistance as there may be, there are also many examples of individuals and organizations that are taking steps towards including children in decision-making and project planning. Such examples as the ones we will see, of children’s participation in development around the world, remind us that children are competent partners in change and development.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid

### **3. Children's Participation in Practice**

#### **3.1 Children's Participation in the NGO World**

##### **NGOs Working with Children**

In the work of NGOs, participation started to gain momentum in the 1970s and was anchored firmly in the 1980s and 1990s as a key to development. Oakley (1995) explains that in terms of development, people's participation has come to represent a major new influence on thinking and practice, which takes on different forms and follows different directions in different contexts (p.6).<sup>67</sup> NGOs, as wide a concept as that may be, can often be smaller grassroots organizations that have special contact and direct access to local populations that other development agencies, especially governmental ones, do not always have. Therefore, it is in their interest and in the interest of the populations they are trying to help, to work together. Oakley (1995) claims, "it is widely argued that organisations have a fundamental role to play in providing the means whereby people can effectively participate in development activities (p.14).

This groundwork for including participation in development is key as a basis to including children's participation. The benefits of participation overall have been examined, so have those of children's participation. The findings clarify that we shouldn't separate children's participation from general participation, but rather group it within or together. Numerous organizations are beginning to understand the significance of including children in their participation initiatives and are now starting to do so. A Plan (2004) report states:

Child-focused agencies are becoming increasingly aware of the tremendous potential that participation offers in terms of benefiting not only those children directly involved but also their peers, families and wider communities, and even the agencies themselves.

A number of international NGOs have been historically active in children's issues and now have an increased interest in children's participation. Among these organizations, Save the Children, UNICEF, and Plan are just a few big ones. There are many other organizations, smaller but just as significant that also commit a great deal to working on children's participation and children's rights.

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<sup>67</sup> Oakley, P. (1995, January 1). People's participation in development projects. Retrieved from <http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/128/OPS-7-Peoples-Participation-in-Development-Projects.pdf>

More and more, organisations like Save the Children and their NGO partners are supporting girls and boys to develop their own groups or organisations as a means to further realise their citizenship rights. Through their own organisations space is sustained for girls, boys and young people to interact, share experiences, analyse issues, explore solutions, prioritise actions and gain collective bargaining power to influence issues affecting them in their local communities.<sup>68</sup>

Save the Children and UNICEF have been especially crucial in promoting children's rights and bringing issues including children's participation to the forefront. Save the Children, an organization working on children's issues that has existed for over 75 years, has focused on emergency response, education, health, protection, and poverty reduction, but in the last decade has also focused programs on children's participation. A 2002 Report on "Children as Citizens", written by Claire O'Kane, demonstrates examples of children's participation in development across Asia, among other places. This shows a growing interest in implementing further programs that are inclusive of children.<sup>69</sup>

UNICEF has been a driving force in the protection of children and in promoting children's rights. As a UN body, they have the influence and power to bring about change on a global level. Their work focuses mainly on poverty alleviation, reducing discrimination, disease, and violence against children. Their commitment to children's rights also transcends to children's participation in development.<sup>70</sup>

Plan International, one of the oldest and largest children's development organizations, has also proven to be an active player in promoting children's participation. A 2004 report focused on "Children Changing their World" highlights the benefits of children's participation as well as the challenges.<sup>71</sup>

Eurochild is a network of organizations working across Europe to promote the rights and well being of children. They work on activities including promoting children's rights, reducing poverty, education, and child and youth participation. A number of their projects, including Together Old &

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<sup>68</sup> O'Kane, C. (2003). Children and Young People as Citizens, Partners for Social Change, Highlighting Poistive Impact. Kathmandu: Save the Children.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.savethechildren.org>

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.unicef.org>

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.plan-international.org>

Young, and their involvement in the CATS Conference, demonstrate their commitment to children's participation.<sup>72</sup>

The Child-to-Child Trust is an organization working with and for children with the belief that children who are involved in their lives can change their lives. The organization has been a pioneer in children's participation over the last 30 years. Their work includes training global agencies to enable children to play meaningful roles in their own lives and in their communities.<sup>73</sup>

This brief introduction into NGOs' work on children's participation only skims the surface of the work that is being done today on the subject. Many other organizations, some grassroots, and some much bigger, are hopping on the train to children's participation and implementing projects to promote this cause.

### **The Children as Actors for Transforming Society (CATS) Initiative**

The CATS Conference, Children as Actors for Transforming Society, is a new example of children's participation in practice. It was initiated in 2012 and the first CATS Conference was held at the end of July 2013. Conceived as a weeklong program, where children, young people, and adults come together to discuss issues that relate to improving society and improving the conditions that children are living in, CATS is a unique experience.

The origin of CATS came from the fact that the world today is at a critical point marked by growing inequalities and political instability. Therefore, it is crucial, now more than ever, for people of all generations to come together to improve society in order to understand the challenges that we face and identify the solutions to implement them.

CATS promotes the active participation of children in society in order to make real, sustainable changes. Not only do children need to understand their own fundamental rights, but grasping how they participate in changing behaviors and mentalities is vital to moving our world forward. For all of these reasons, and more, the idea of a conference focused on children as actors for transforming society, CATS, was born. With this ideology, and with the help of numerous contributors to the

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<sup>72</sup> <http://www.eurochild.org>

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.childtochild.org.uk/about/>

cause, CATS hopes to reinvent a world in which each person plays an active role, children included.<sup>74</sup>

### ***CATS Vision***

A world where children, young people and adults are working together in mutual respect towards a more just, inclusive and sustainable society where all can realize their fundamental human rights and potential.<sup>75</sup>

### **CATS Mission**

To enable children, young people and adults who are advocates for the rights and well-being of children to work together as agents of change and co-creators of a more just, sustainable, inclusive and equitable society.<sup>76</sup>

Held in the mountains of Caux, Switzerland, at the Caux Centre, CATS provides the unique opportunity for over 300 participants to come together in one space and reflect on children's participation through a weeklong program. CATS is a powerful learning experience for people of all ages: both children and adults develop their working skills and knowledge on children's issues, while also becoming equipped with principals, tools, and practices for improving children's participation. Children and adults both raise their awareness about how each one can contribute to insuring equal rights and the well-being of children.<sup>77</sup>

The organizers of CATS firmly believe in children and young people's roles in transforming society and in their active participation. While there are already existing organizations working on children's participation and rights, CATS is a unique living experience where children, young people, and adults come together as equal partners to finds way to improve society together.

CATS is an initiative run primarily by 3 organizations including the following:

Initiatives of Change (France), including the director, Jonathan Levy, of the CATS project –is part of a world-wide movement of people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, who are committed to the transformation of society through changes in human motives and behavior, starting with their own.

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<sup>74</sup> [www.catsconference.com](http://www.catsconference.com)

<sup>75</sup> CATS Executive Strategy Plan

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

Child to Child Trust (England) is an association with international standing. Their mission is to enable and empower young people worldwide to reach their full potential and achieve their rights by promoting the holistic health, well being of themselves, their families, and their communities.

Universal Education Foundation (Belgium) is an association with a vision of “Inclusive and supportive societies where children and adults respect each other as competent partners and learn how to realize their unique potential throughout their lives”.<sup>78</sup>

The Core Team is made up of people from other organizations as well including: Eurochild, International Janusz Korczak Association, Funky Dragon, Lumos, and Initiatives of Change Sweden.

During CATS 2013 and 2014 children, young people, and adults from all around the world came to participate. 2013 was the first CATS experience and a success on many levels. There was a diverse representation of individuals from countries around the world and different age groups. About 25% of the participants were children. While the conference started out with parallel programs for adults and children, as the week progressed, there was a general consensus that there was a need to bring children and adults together. Small community discussion groups, as well as evening programs, were the main spaces for creating opportunities for intergenerational exchanges. Many lessons were learned from the first CATS edition, which helped in improving and modifying the following year.

In 2014, the conference was almost at parity in terms of the number of individuals over 18 and those under, this was a great accomplishment in just one year. People from all continents and diverse countries such as Peru, Brazil, Cameroon, South Korea, Bangladesh, India, France, Wales, the United States, and more, came to the CATS Conference in it's most recent edition. All of these different cultures had a chance to work and reflect together in the aim of finding solutions to today's problems. Various organizations including Eurochild, World Vision, Save the Children, Apprentis d'Auteuil, and Bernard van Leer funded for delegations from around the world to come. Children were eager to present their cultures and organizations, and created a positive environment full of energy and optimism.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid

CATS 2014, focused on Young Advocates for Change, aimed to have active child advocates at the conference, to share their experiences, learn from others, and find ways to move forward. Each day looked at a different theme, including children as educators, children as health activists, children as media-makers, and children as decision-makers. These different themes, introduced each day in morning plenary sessions, were then discussed further in smaller groups and workshops. Participants left the conference invigorated and motivated to share what they had learned with their local communities back home. In addition, some organizations, including Apprentis d'Auteuil expressed their interest in restructuring their organizations to make them more inclusive of children's participation. In this way, the CATS Conference is slowly turning into a yearlong program.

As the CATS team prepares for its third edition, to be held at the end of July, 2015, they hope to use their past experiences to make the next conference even more inclusive and meaningful in terms of children's participation. They hope to attract the attention and participation of important child rights activists, such as this year's winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, but also consider local grassroots organizations and everyday families to be just as important in promoting the cause of adults and children working together as partners for change.

### **3.2 Regional Examples of Children's Participation in Development**

The following examples of children's participation come from around the world, from different cultures and contexts. It is important to remember that the culture and context of each geographical location can greatly affect the extent of children's participation. The understanding of 'childhood' versus 'adulthood' changes drastically from one side of the hemisphere to another. Most of Western society considers the concept of childhood as a time when children should be carefree and protected by their guardians, with few responsibilities and hardships, if possible. On the other hand, in many developing countries, children may already be working by the age of 10, if not younger, and considered a vital financial hand in their family or community. The reasons for these differences do not always reflect a higher awareness of children's competency, but rather a simple need for their help. In any case, it is crucial to recognize these opposing and existing realities. In addition, such portrayals of childhood in developed countries versus developing countries can also be seen as simple generalizations, and we should keep in mind that each case is unique and different.

Despite the differences in children's realities, a common consensus can be made that if given the opportunity and the choice, many children want to take part in making decisions and improving their surroundings, we will see this in the following examples of children's participation around the world. Young people are, in fact, competent humans who can participate in different ways.

“There are many theories of play, but common to most of them is the concept of a desire for competence. One of the great writers of child development and education theory, Maria Montessori, described play as “the work of the child”. Much of playing is a training ground for later participation with adults in work: learning the properties of materials, developing physical skills, exploring tool use, and social cooperation (Hart. P.22, 1992).”

The following paragraphs will focus on providing a series of examples of children's participation in community and regional development. Although Europe and North America are not represented in any of the case studies below, that's not to say that they don't demonstrate numerous examples of children's participation as well. The case studies chosen for this paper come from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This list is my no means exhaustive or representative of all kinds of children's participation, but rather a short selection to demonstrate just a small number of unique organizations, children, young people, and adults.

## **The Middle East**

### ***The Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation (PYALARA)***

The Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation (PYALARA), established in 1999, believes that young people can be active participants in working towards peace and reaching stability in conflict. It also considers the reflections and concerns of youth to be of vital importance.

The organization first started by creating a newspaper, written by and for youth between the ages of 14 and 25, called *The Youth Times*. As the years have passed, the work of PYALARA has expanded to include a youth led television show called *Alli Sawtak*, which discusses varied issues, and a program called We Care, giving young people the chance to voice their problems and worries and participate in workshops.

“...participation—sometimes framed as “protagonism”—is the means by which the young are empowered to transform the structures, practices and attitudes that exclude them socially, culturally, politically and economically (p.2-3).”<sup>79</sup> This is one of the introductory statements that Jason Hart makes in his article about PYALARA and general understanding of youth participation. Although his work focused mainly on demonstrating the challenges to youth participation and frustrations in the Palestinian region, the article also illustrates the work of the organization, from which positive aspects can be drawn.

By contrast to many of the short-term initiatives for young people witnessed in recent years, PYALARA has been working steadily since the late 1990s with the clear aims of developing young participants and supporting their creative engagement in the transformation of society (p.2).<sup>80</sup>

While there are many difficulties to the work that the PYALARA organization is doing, specifically because of the conflicts between Israel and Palestine, some examples of efforts for development should be noted. Nonetheless, it’s important to remember that for “young Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip have never known life except under occupation (p.4)”<sup>81</sup> and development projects especially with children and youth are not easy to organize. In addition, the experiences of Palestinian children in comparison to those living in Israel are hard to compare because in many ways, they are living different realities.

In such a situation, it’s hard to imagine what children and young people can do to better their lives. However, something as simple as getting to know the people on the other side can make a difference.

...the Israeli-Palestinian “peace building” initiatives have been pursued since the early 1990s. Usually such projects occur outside the region, often taking the form of summer camps. Organizers and the wider constituency of supporters generally assume that the

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<sup>79</sup> Cussianovich, A. & Marquez, A.M. (2002). *Toward a Protagonist Participation of Boys, Girls and Teenagers*. Lima: Save the Children Sweden. In Hart, J. (2007). “Empowerment or Frustration? Participatory Programming with Young Palestinians.” *Children, Youth and Environments* Vol.17, No.3, pp.1-23.

<sup>80</sup> Hart, J. (2007). Empowerment or Frustration? Participatory Programming with Young Palestinians. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 17(3), 1-23.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid

sharing of various activities and intense exchange among the young Israeli and Palestinian participants will contribute to better understanding and thereby constitute a step towards peace (p.9).<sup>82</sup>

PYALARA also believes in the change that young people can make on an international level, not only locally. They send young people abroad to international conferences giving them the opportunity of “presenting a clear and informed account of their lives under the conditions of occupation... Their participation in such events is an opportunity to build understanding and solidarity towards transformation of the current political conditions...(p.12-13).”<sup>83</sup>

In addition, the issues discussed within PYALARA by the young people are real, and at times controversial ones that can have a real impact on changing their environment. By bringing up real issues they hope to provoke serious reflections in hopes of finding solutions.

PYALARA does not avoid discussion of political issues—as evidenced by the contents of *The Youth Times* and *Alli Sawtak*. In recent editions, for example, there have been discussions of child prisoners, Israelis who refuse army service, the Palestinian presidential elections, and the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Such topics address the daily realities and concerns of young Palestinians... Rather than encouraging adherence to a particular ideological viewpoint, their aim is to enhance the development of young people as informed and critically-engaged members of society (p.14).<sup>84</sup>

While the effects of PYALARA on a development level may be hard to measure, we should not ignore that simply by having young Palestinians and Israeli interacting and discussing the issues that concern their daily lives, small steps can be made. In the case of PYALARA specifically, they have achieved establishing a youth media initiative in a region that has rarely seen such a project. In addition, the issues being discussing through their newspaper and television show are reaching other young people and impacting their lives.

For example, Nibal Thawabteh, from the media institute at Bir Zeit University, related the following account:

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

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*I know a girl who watched an episode of Alli Sawtak talking about early marriage. Afterwards she had a discussion with her family and changed their minds on this matter so that they let her finish her studies. There are many stories about this kind of change in behavior (p.18).<sup>85</sup>*

PYALARA has also been crucial in helping establish a syndicate for young journalists. This demonstrates how projects, on a long-term basis, can make real changes. Development that is needed in the region may not be reached within a young person's lifetime today, but the work that is being established now will certainly help shape the development of the future. "Perhaps the most obvious sign of the potential for long-term change lies with the young people themselves. PYALARA has always seen the development of its volunteers and staff as the foundation of wider social change (p.18)."<sup>86</sup>

### ***Children's Para Development Committees, Thar Desert, Pakistan***

Save the Children has been doing a lot of work with children around the world, including helping setup children's committees on development issues. This is precisely what happened in the Thar Desert in Pakistan where Save the Children UK facilitated the Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP), which afterwards became an independent organization.

Working in an integrated manner with men, women and children the TRDP programme mobilises the community through organising them in village or para development committees. Working in 560 villages in one district, TRDP's goal is to facilitate a community managed process contributing towards the development of sustainable livelihood in Thar.<sup>87</sup>

The work with children was crucial because it meant that adults recognized the differing perspectives and ideas that children could bring to help face development issues.

The children used the example of the existing adult development committees to form their own. Today there are over fifty children's "para development committees" with over 1000 members

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid

<sup>86</sup> Ibid

<sup>87</sup> O'Kane, C. (2003). *Children and Young People as Citizens, Partners for Social Change, Highlighting Poistive Impact*. Kathmandu: Save the Children.

in the Thar Desert. Because of cultural traditions, there are fewer girls involved in the committees than boys, but there are some nonetheless. “The children’s organisations have the same structure as the adult (PDCs) with an appointed President, General Secretary and Treasurer, along with general members. Most groups have between 10-20 members (p.28).”<sup>88</sup>

After the children expressed their desire to create children’s para committees, the TRDP facilitates setting it up and also guides children in bookkeeping, registration and other issues they may need help with. As for the children, they discuss a variety of topics in their committees, all related to community development problems. This includes “savings, planning visits, water and food issues relating to drought, recreation, information sharing, developing dramas and tableaux (on child labour, education, impact of drought, immunisation), and kitchen gardening (p.28).”<sup>89</sup>

Children request the right to be recognized as social actors in village decision-making

In one village in Chelhar a VDO (Village Development Organisation) was being formed with representatives from the men and women’s ‘para development committees’ (PDCs). The children were upset at being left out. They spoke up and explained that their representatives should also be included, highlighting the importance of the process: “*We do not expect you to always respond to our demands, but we do expect you to listen to us. We should have been involved in this process.*”

**Figure 6. Children’s Para Development Committees, Thar Desert, Pakistan<sup>90</sup> (Save the Children)**

Through these children’s para development committees, young people in communities of the Thar Desert have been able to become more active citizens and play a true part in the local development of their neighborhoods.

### ***Child-to-Child Groups Among Afghani Children***

The “child-to-child” approach in which children teach each other has been used in various different organizations working on children’s issues and children’s participation. “Save the Children Sweden and US have encouraged Child-to-Child methods in refugee camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan to promote information sharing among children and adults on health, nutrition and

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> O’Kane, C. (2003). *Children and Young People as Citizens, Partners for Social Change, Highlighting Poistive Impact*. Kathmandu: Save the Children. p.28

landmine issues (p.10).”<sup>91</sup> In Kabul, Aghanistan in particular, children have been very active, with the help of Save the Children US. In one example, children were worried about an open well and so parents helped organize groups to cover the wells to avoid danger to the children. In another community, children, with the help of others, organized road safety protocol to help children cross the street at high-risk times, which led to the municipality building a pavement sidewalk to keep children safe.<sup>92</sup>

Afghani children in very difficult situations, in refugee camps, have also been able to take part in child-to-child groups. They were initially able to learn about their rights, as well as social and community issues. This empowered them allowing them to understand their rights and the protection they deserve. The knowledge they gained allowed for them to apply a standard of expectations in their schools and communities and to reclaim their rights.

### ***Participation in a Youth Organization in Turkey- Young Volunteers***

Turkey is a very interesting country because it’s geographical position has been a controversial issue over the last few years. It has more often than not been considered a Middle Eastern country, but is also considered to be approaching Europe as well. Indeed, the addition of Turkey in the European Union has been a heated topic in the past. For some, it is the crossroads between Middle Eastern culture and European culture. Politics aside, it is also a country with an incredibly large population of under 18 year olds. Therefore, the voice of children and young people is of particular importance.

In Turkey, where (according to the 2007 census) 44 per cent of the population are 24 years of age or younger, youth are perceived as the major resource for the development and prosperity of the country, as well as guardians of the Republic, a role ascribed to them since the formation of the Republic (p.277).<sup>93</sup>

However, despite this declared interest in children’s participation, the truth comes down to the fact that many of the countries young come from rural and urban areas that do not have the means to

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> Ibid

<sup>93</sup> Sancar, F., & Severcan, Y. (2010). In Search of Agency, Participation in a youth organisation in Turkey. In *A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation, Perspectives from Theory and Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

truly invest in it. Much of the youth is in poverty, and very few government officials realistically try to include them in decision-making and consultation. Children and young people who do participate in the community often come from educated families with more means.

Despite the obstacles that many children and young people face in Turkey, there have been some gems that have been able to shine. In particular, an organization called Young Volunteers, which was created by young people in 2004. “The headquarters of the organisation is located in Ayazaga, a squatter neighbourhood in Sisli, one of the most prestigious municipalities of Istanbul (p.279).”<sup>94</sup> It was founded by a 16-year-old boy, Eyup Coskun, who wanted a space where children and young people could self-govern and address existing problems. Together with a group of about 10 other youth, they went to see the mayor of Sisli in 2003 with a project plan and a request for funding, which was later granted.

The executive board of Young Volunteers, whose ages vary between 16 and 35, elected Eyup as the president and the organisation embarked on a wide range of activities, including setting up branches in a number of cities beyond Istanbul and forming a membership in Ankara, the capital, to enable easier communication and follow-up with regard to project proposals at the seat of the central government. One of the first and most highly profiled activities of the organisation was to establish the ‘People’s Assembly of Ayazaga’, attended by 550 people from the neighbourhood and where they discussed neighbourhood issues and problems and formed a dozen committees to work on them p.279-280).<sup>95</sup>

Since the children and young people involved came from disadvantaged neighbors where specific problems were prevalent, they had first hand experience in the issues associated to them and in many ways could better address them. “First-hand knowledge of the local environment, building on previous experiences, enthusiasm for changing the condition of disadvantaged youth, and the learning and practice environment offered by the organisation have led to the success of the Young Volunteers’ activities (p.282).”<sup>96</sup>

The Young Volunteers organization led a number of important projects that lead to the development of their community. These include a project funded by the European Union which

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> Ibid

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

addressed the issues of gangs and drug abuse in Istanbul, a series of workshops for young people from Turkey and Europe, and the creation of a network of committees and groups across Turkey, who all address issues facing their communities. They also established an after-school and weekend program for tutoring children and young people. Despite the many challenges they have faced along the way, they have also been able to succeed because of the strong connections built between members. In addition, international collaboration has been key to the Young Volunteer's organization's success. "Some of the executive members of the organisation are adults who have experience with social development projects. These people did not take on leadership functions, but helped Eyup and his young colleagues with project proposals, grant applications and networking (p. 282)."<sup>97</sup>

This also goes to show that while initiatives can very much be child and young people led, this does not exclude the participation and guidance of adults, so long as they allow the space for the children and young people to make their voice heard. Leaving room for the children and young people to thrive and work as they can is vital. The authors who interviewed Eyup Coskun and then wrote up the article about the Young Volunteer's organization explain:

During our interview, Eyup Coskun told the story of how the organisation found its place:

They offered us space in a nice building located in central Nisantasi. We did not accept it. We said, 'What kind of problems do the wealthy folks in Nisantasi have? Maybe traffic congestion?' Let them solve it on their own. In other words, we wanted to begin a movement for development here in our own backyard. We can instigate our projects from this place and reach out. And that is how we began. If we can solve problems here, we can do the same anywhere. This is our context where we can learn (p.284).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

## ASIA

### *Children's Participation in Bangladesh*

#### *The Amra Organization*

White and Choudhury contributed to the Handbook on Children and Young People's Participation (2010) by writing about their experiences with the Amra organization in Bangladesh. In an earlier work, White and Choudhury (2007) explain that children's participation comes in many forms in Bangladesh.

These include:

*presentation, consultation and advocacy. Presentations* range from street theatre, to child survivors' testimonies, to 'cultural programmes' of singing and dancing. *Consultation* spans children being targeted as survey respondents for inclusion within project- cycle reference groups. *Advocacy* includes children's media, journalism and video projects and lobbying in national and international forums. Common to all these, however, is an underlying positioning of the child as informant, even, at times, as expert.<sup>99</sup>

With their experiences with the Amra Organization in particular, they begin by setting the scene; a group of young boys are sitting together trying to resolve the problem of a violent incident that happened the day before between two of them. They try to understand why one boy reacted violently to another when he didn't get what he wanted. As their discussions continue, they come to understand that because of a fight with his mother that left him kicked out of the house for three days, with no food or water, the boy reacted violently. They first instantly go to get food for the boy after which they come to an agreement that he will not use violence as the answer next time. This is an example of how the children are able to consult with one another to resolve problems, in this organization.

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<sup>99</sup> White, S., & Choudhury, S. (2010). Children's participation in Bangladesh, Issues of agency and structures of violence. In *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation, Perspectives from Theory and Practice* (pp. 39-50). Abingdon: Routledge.

“Set up in 1995, Amra was designed not to be a project for children’s participation, but to be a children’s organisation in which street and working children would get together to work on literacy and consciousness raising with other children like themselves (p.41).”<sup>100</sup> Amra is a small organization working in local communities with a focus on the group process. “In 2000 it had a core group of eight to ten boys working with around seventy children in street-level groups and supported by around thirty others, including formerly active members who still wanted to support the organization (White & Choudhury, 2010, p.44).” Their activities include promoting health and literacy, organizing fun days, and addressing issues of violence.

Issues of violence are of particular importance for Amra, because the children and young people grow up in communities where violence is often a part of everyday life. However, the organization aims to minimize the “normality” of violence and create a space for children to discuss their issues and try and work them out, taking violence out of the equation.

With time the organization changed in many ways. It went from an action focus to an advocacy focus (White & Choudhury, 2010) especially because it was a unique organization led by and for children in the slums of Bangladesh, which attracted the attention of NGOs working specifically on children’s participation. Although this did change some dynamics in the organization, including creating a more elite space. Where all children could once join in, some now felt too intimidated, however Amra continued to work with many children on development of the community. Children have many opportunities to participate in fact, as “the question, therefore, becomes not whether young people participate, but in what, and on what and whose terms: how to foster participation of the right kind (p.48).”<sup>101</sup>

### *‘Shishu Parishad’ (Children’s Councils) in Bangladesh*

In Bangladesh, there are now 700 Children’s Councils, known as Shishu Parishad, which began through the help of Save the Children Australia and it’s partner NGOs and the child participation work they were doing there.<sup>102</sup> Girls and boys between the ages of 6-14 have been

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> O’Kane, C. (2003). *Children and Young People as Citizens, Partners for Social Change, Highlighting Poistive Impact*. Kathmandu: Save the Children.

encouraged to participate in the Shishu Parishads and they have succeeded in reaching over 40,000 children.

These Children's Councils give opportunities to demonstrate their capacity to plan, organise and implement activities, to access information and to express their needs. They have been effective in achieving genuine advances for Bangladeshi children accessing their rights. Involvement in Children's Councils enhances children's confidence, makes them aware of their rights and develops skills necessary to access these rights. This leads to greater participation in family, institutions and community life, increasing their sense of social responsibility and civic duty, qualities essential to future citizenship and leadership roles (p.12).<sup>103</sup>

Through these children's councils, members have been able to gain knowledge that has helped them to face new problems with new perspectives. Participants discuss issues ranging from child marriage, to poverty, to lacking access to education, and more.

### ***The Concerned for Working Children, India***

The Concerned for Working Children (CWC) is a non-profit organization based in Bengaluru, India, which has been working since the 1970s with working children and their needs. CWC works in cooperation with children on many different levels, from local communities, to local government, to national and international organizations. Their work is based first and foremost on children's rights and on not only listening to children, but also empowering them so they can help themselves.

In describing their approach, they clarify how they empower children:

To that end, we have facilitated children to form their own unions, worked to increase children's participation in governance, and conducted pioneering work helping children carry out research and information management.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid

<sup>104</sup> The Concerned for Working Children: [www.concernedforworkingchildren.org](http://www.concernedforworkingchildren.org)

In addition, the organization emphasizes that while other children's organizations have grouped all children together or adults have created the composition of the children's organization, CWC allows for children to do this on their own in a natural way.

We allowed children to form organisations based on their need, commonality of issues and concerns and comfort. They fell into natural groupings and we did not impose our thinking on them. Working children wanted to come together to address their problems and they formed Bhima Sangha. Working youth wanted to come together not only to address their problems but also to directly intervene in political structures and they formed Namma Sabha. Kids who were differently-abled wanted their own forum, just as school children. Now the kids want a pan all organisation for all children and are trying to work out the structure and functioning of this pan all organisation/child rights organisation/ federation (p.10).<sup>105</sup>

While the work that children through CWC are doing is numerous and diverse, one example provided by The Concerned for Working Children report, "A Journey in Children's Participation (2002), illustrates an amazing initiative taken by the children which brought about real results in their village.

In the town of Nandrolli, a small remote village located on the Western Ghats in Karnataka, India, with a population of about 400 to 450 people, alcoholism was a growing problem and even a way of life.<sup>106</sup> Alcohol was sold in liquor stores, in vegetable shops, and even on the streets outside. The children, among other people, felt that issues were coming up caused by drunkenness and wanted to find a solution. The children's village council decided to bring up this problem during the monthly Task Force (decision-making body in the village) meeting. Reddy and Ratna (2002) explain that "they identified it not only as an individual or family problem, but also as a community problem, affecting the entire village (p.13)." Despite the children's arguments of alcoholism creating problems at home, inciting health problems, and even being dangerous, their arguments did not push the adults to action. At the next Task Force meeting, the children brought it up again, and again the adults brushed the problem aside saying that without concrete evidence of how many people in the village drink and how much they spend on it, nothing could be done.

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<sup>105</sup> Reddy, N. & Ratna, K. (2002). *A Journey in Children's Participation*. Bangalore: The Concerned for Working Children.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p.13

Hearing this, the children put together a sophisticated plan for collecting data on people drinking alcohol in the village and how much money was being wasted on it.

The children decided that as a part of their 'clean the village' campaign they would get the required information. They first cleaned up the entire area surrounding the arrack (liquor) shops in Nandrolli. Once all the sachets were cleared, they continued their cleaning activity on a daily basis for the entire week. Each day they gathered all the empty sachets of arrack near the shops and counted them. They found that an average of 300 packets of arrack are consumed per day. Then they made their calculations (p.14).<sup>107</sup>

They came to the conclusion that Rs. 99,000.00 was being spent per month equaling Rs. 11,088,000.00 per year, which is a huge amount for a small village such as Nandrolli. They waited until the right time to present this information to the Village Council, and when they did, the adults were astonished and also ashamed that they had previously brushed this issue to the side, and that it was children who demonstrated its importance to them.

As a first response, the village decided to immediately stop the sale of alcohol in all places except for licensed liquor shops. Next steps were to submit a memorandum prepared by the children to the District authorities to further close some of the liquor shops and take the problem of alcoholism more seriously.<sup>108</sup>

This is an incredibly example of children taking power into their own hands and addressing real issues that their communities face. Thanks to the efforts of the children's council in this community, family relations and public life could improve and develop in the neighborhood.

### ***Child Clubs of Sri Lanka***

Save the Children has been working in Sri Lanka since the 1990s initially with child participatory research. Later, in 1999, Save the Children UK and Norway began encouraging children to develop Child Clubs, and now almost every district of Sri Lanka has a child's club.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

In some areas these Clubs have played a key role in bringing together girls and boys from different religions and ethnic groups. This breaks down discrimination and ethnic tensions, and promotes peace and community development (p.29).<sup>109</sup>

Through these opportunities, children and young people will hopefully also have more access to decision-making and participation in governance in Sri Lanka. Save the Children is now working with local NGOs to connect the Child Clubs with Village Development Committees as well as other adult decision-making structures.<sup>110</sup>

One example of work done in these Child Clubs is from the Mannar District in Sri Lanka, where ethnic conflict erupted in 2000, creating tensions and problems in local communities. Children met in Child Clubs, through the support of Save the Children, in order to “enhance community integration”<sup>111</sup> and provide a space to meet and talk.

### ***Child Clubs in Nepal***

There are currently at least 3000 Child Clubs in Nepal that have been developed over the past decade in different areas including rural hillsides and urban areas. The development of these Child Clubs was with the purpose of advancing democracy and children’s rights. The Chandhra Surya Child Club in Chitwan counts about 40 girls and boys between the ages of 6 and 16 who participate in re-building the community activities after it was hit with hard flooding in 1993. To describe some of the work they do:

The children and their activities are part of a larger community development scheme. They are highly involved in community development and adults are very interested in the Children’s Club. The children monitor and inspect the cleanliness of homes and toilets. Their activities include financially sponsoring a few children to go to local schools, running various competitions and drawing programmes, and performing dramas (p.25).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> O’Kane, C. (2003). Children and Young People as Citizens, Partners for Social Change, Highlighting Poistive Impact. Kathmandu: Save the Children.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p.30

<sup>112</sup> Ibid

In Bhowani Child Club, Eastern Nepal, children explain what they are gaining from being part of a Child's Club:

The children felt that they had gained considerably from being part of their Child Club:

- they had gained lots of information about their rights,
- through drama, speeches and other programmes they raised awareness of child rights in their village.
- they had raised various issues such as school enrolment, birth registration, child abuse child marriage and trafficking, health and sanitation (e.g. vaccinations, diarrhoea) (p.26).<sup>113</sup>

Save the Children Norway and US, also went on to help create a Consortium of Child Clubs of Nepal in 1999 to help promote children's participation through clubs, and to create a network for sharing knowledge and experiences, and to further the children's movement in Nepal.

### ***Children's Participation in China***

Out of China's continuously growing population, 345 million are children aged between 0-17, which makes up 28 percent of the total population, according to 2007 figures.<sup>114</sup> These children are spread across the country in many different cities, towns, and villages, where they all face different adversities. Migration is more and more a part of people's lives now as they move from small villages to the city in hopes of better educations, jobs, and overall living standards. Boys and girls face different challenges as well because of traditions and culture. All of these factors, and many more affect the child participation climate in China.

It's also important to keep in mind that China has a long history of a collective work mentality, and less of a focus on the individual.

The question of individualist and collectivist approaches provides an important context here, because of the links between rights, participation and citizenship, and the notion that collectives rather than individuals are the rights-holders. This is used as a reason to

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> West, A., Xue Mei, C., Chun Na, A., & Qiang, C. (2007). Performance to Practice: Changing the Meaning of Child Participation in China. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 17(1), 14-32.

downplay children's participation, since children should bow to the will of the collective, a will that is usually governed by age-based hierarchies (p.19).<sup>115</sup>

This factor, in addition to the fact that many Chinese people still relate to a hierarchical mentality in which children are obedient of parents, wives of husbands, and adults of the government, make participation a complicated concept in China. However, China is modernizing and people's mentalities are changing and more of a space for children's participation now exists. Where children once "participated" in schools plays and other demonstrations of good education, now, in some places, they are taking part in decision-making practices.

A national seminar was held in 2002 on existing practices of that time and future practices of children's participation that involved innovative practitioners from around the country. They found that:

The rationale for participation was children's development, learning and involvement in local community improvement. "Participatory" activities have included using kindergartens for children's participation, conducting "participation activities" such as community-cleaning, environmental protection, summer camps, special-interest classes, playing chess, ball sports, music and painting groups, and drama groups for children up to the age of 18 (p.20).<sup>116</sup>

While discussions at this national seminar were certainly fruitful, China is still far from demonstrating exemplary children's participation. To start with, the notion of "rights" in China remains sensitive (West, Xue Mei, Ye, Chun Na, & Qiang, 2007). However, organizations such as Save the Children, UNICEF and Plan International have initiated work in China. In addition, the country has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In the 1990s, international organizations with an interest in children's participation began to contribute resources, methodologies, training and support for work with children in China. Forms of participation were taken up as a theme in projects run by partnerships between government and international children's organizations in different parts of the country. For example, a Save the Children cross-border trafficking project in southwest China, Myanmar

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> Ibid

and Laos used participatory action research with children and young people to identify problems and solutions. Similarly, a Save the Children street children project that was implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Civil Affairs in five provinces introduced participatory ways of research and working with children together with promoting children's rights.<sup>117</sup>

In addition, the first China National Children's Forum was held in 2001, followed by the National Forum on child participation in 2002, which demonstrated progress in terms of incorporating children's participation in policy and society. It seems so far that there have been efforts to have more events and one-time projects, such as conferences and forums on child participation, but the foundation of child-led organizations or collaboration with children has been slower in progressing.

Although child-led initiatives are not abundant, there are some to be noted, especially in research. Some examples include:

- in 2004-05, the Ministry of Civil Affairs undertook research with and by children in government-run street children centers. Some of the children involved presented their results and ideas at a Ministry of Civil Affairs conference held to improve the quality of work with street children and prepare for new regulations (p.27).<sup>118</sup>
- In partnership with local government, research was undertaken by children who were orphaned and affected by HIV/AIDS in central China, where the epidemic is at its worst. The processes involved in this project opened up new areas and rationales for children's participation (p.27).<sup>119</sup>

There is still more work to be done in China, but the stepping stones to children's participation are being set, hopefully leading to a more open future for China's children and youth.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p.104

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p.27

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p.27

## AFRICA

### *Children's participation in law reform in South Africa*

Between 2003 and 2007, The Dikwankwetla- Children in Action project facilitated collaboration between children and adults in drafting the Children's Act and the Children's Amendment Act of South Africa. The project involved 12 children from different provinces in the country. Jamieson and Mukoma (2010) describe how "the children participated in the parliamentary hearings and public debates and were encouraged to make the most of other advocacy opportunities, with the result that they, together with a range of civil society stakeholders, influenced the provisions in the final Acts (p.73)."

The Children's Act and Children's Amendment Act stemmed from an earlier Children's Bill, passed under the new Constitution of South Africa. After the country became democratic, it ratified the UNCRC in 1995, at which point child rights started to be taken more seriously. Jamieson and Mukoma (2010) explain that under the new constitution all children have the right to:

- Family care, parental care or appropriate alternative care
- Social services, and
- Protection from abuse, neglect, maltreatment and degradation<sup>120</sup>

Although the Children's Bill may have been a big step after apartheid, it was not perfect by any means. In 2003, a group of organizations working on children's issues campaigned to have changes made to the Bill. In particular, The Children's Institute and the University of Cape Town were responsible for coordinating the campaign. Twelve children between the ages of 11 and 17 were selected from four different provinces, from different situations and backgrounds. Some came from rural areas, while some from urban ones. Most came from communities greatly affected by HIV/AIDS, while some also came from urban areas where crime and violence were prevalent. In order to choose the participating children, The Children's Institute partnered with local NGOs in the provinces who then asked the children if they would be interested in participating. Four children then went on to carry out work over a four year period on legislation for children's rights.

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<sup>120</sup> Jamieson, L., & Mukoma, W. (2010). Dikwankwetla – Children in Action, Children's participation in the law reform process in South Africa. In *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation, Perspectives from Theory and Practice* (pp. 73-82). Abingdon: Routledge.

The children first participated in a series of workshops to familiarize themselves with children's rights and legislation. The first Children's Bill was written in very technical judicial language, which was hard to decipher.

To make it accessible, the team drafted an illustrated resource pack containing a child-friendly version of the Bill (Proudlock et al. 2004 in Jamieson & Mukoma, 2010). The pack was designed after the first workshop, during which children identified the challenges facing them, and it focused on the chapters and clauses corresponding to the issues raised, namely children's rights, parental responsibilities and rights, prevention and protection services (p.76).<sup>121</sup>

The children then prepared presentations for National Assemblies and Parliament members to try and influence changes in the Children's Bill. They shared personal stories of hardship including being abandoned by parents, having numerous family members infected with HIV, and the rape of a close relative by a family member. Some MPs were shocked by the stories they heard and promised to implement added clauses of protection in the Bill. Not everyone reacted in this way though, some adults wanted to help while others didn't understand the need for children's input.

The second Bill was passed by Parliament in 2005, and while it's hard to measure how much of an affect the children's testimonies had directly on the MPs, the Bill certainly contained sections, which were influenced by the children's stories. Jamieson and Mukoma (2010) explain that "although the MPs did not recall the children's submissions specifically, the concerns raised by the children were repeatedly raised by the MPs during the many months of deliberation (p.80)."

The participation of children in the law reform in South African on the Children's Bill was not simple or perfect, but it did give the opportunity for some young people's voices to be heard. "That the final Act contains some of the measures that were recommended by the children is testament to the fact that children are capable of participating meaningfully in the process (Jamieson & Mukoma, 2010)."

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid

### ***Promotion of Reconciliation Among Youth in Rwanda***

The international organization World Vision works on children's rights and children's participation in numerous countries. Of interest here, "The Promotion of Reconciliation Among the Youths (PRAY) project was initiated by World Vision Rwanda to encourage *reconciliation among the youths through working with youths groups and giving youths opportunity to express their aspirations for peace through a wide range of artistic expressions*"<sup>122</sup> PRAY involved youth between 13 and 25 years old who worked in small groups of about 12 to 15 members. "They "elected their own leaders to organise activities and mobilise the group, and undertook discussions and consultations amongst themselves and with adults to build consensus on goals and guidelines for the groups (World Vision Africa, 2008, p.19)."

Young people were encouraged to discuss issues and concerns in relation to conciliation in Rwanda. They met in what they called "Focus Discussion Groups" which proved to be safe spaces for people to interact and create a culture of honesty.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) revealed that the positive messages of peace and reconciliation and peace expressed by the young people in different ways, encouraged a wider culture of honesty and forgiveness. A clear example of this came during one of the meetings held by the *Inshuti Nyayo* (A Friend Indeed) group when a man stood up and confessed to having killed family members of one of the people in the audience. This began the process of reconciliation between them.<sup>123</sup>

The project focused very much on giving young people the chance to express their feelings and influence their communities to create transparent communication. "The project sought to enable young people to form and express their aspirations for peace and to lead the process of change (World Vision Africa, 2008, p.20)." The project lasted six years and had effects on projects that came afterwards. Some young people used the knowledge they had gained from PRAY to create similar groups in other areas, all working towards peace and reconciliation.

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<sup>122</sup> Young, H. (2008). Puppets or Players? A Review of child participation approaches in Africa. Nairobi: World Vision Africa

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p.19

### ***Tanzania's Children's Committees and Councils***

In Tanzania, World Vision aimed to set up child committees in as many communities as possible, to promote children's rights. Schools in different communities chose children to participate in their community children's committees. Because the children were selected by adults, and often with criteria that was not fully inclusive, such as only picking students who were comfortable speaking in public, the child-led aspect of the committees is somewhat questionable. Despite that, 40 children between the ages of 10-18 were chosen, including a gender balance.

Children's Committees were then broken down into children's clubs based on communities to make interaction and meetings more accessible to those living closer to each other. The aim of the Committees and Clubs was to discuss problems concerning the community and the young people. A national council, called the Children's Junior Council, was later formed as well, requested by the children and young people.

The formation of a national council, which came to be known as the Children's Junior Council, was proposed by a number of the children's committees who sought help from World Vision staff to facilitate the process. The children were the driving force in wanting to influence national policy and the issues raised were of direct relevance to them.<sup>124</sup>

These initiatives show real commitment on the part of these young people to make a change in their communities and in society.

### ***Children's Involvement in Peace Building in Uganda***

Much of children's contributions to peace building has been through discussions and raising awareness of peace. Existing child clubs and committees also attempt to influence policy and change mindsets through intergenerational discourse. Feinstein, Giertsen, and O'Kane (2010) comment on how children and young people can make a difference in conflict resolution and peace building:

...children are also advocating for increased space in political processes affecting them, including formal peace-talk, reconciliation and reconstruction processes, so that they may

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p.22

more meaningfully contribute to efforts to identify, address and monitor the structural factors which inhibit peace and the fulfillment of children's rights (p.58).<sup>125</sup>

During a thematic evaluation conducted by Save the Children, a peace-talk process was underway in Northern Uganda, a positive sign of peace, and security, which would greatly affect the children and young people in the area. Children participated in school peace clubs and other clubs outside of school. Their work and contributions varied, including:

- promoting unity at community level through cultural dance and drumming;
- praying for peace and reconciliation;
- initiating community activities to build cooperation and solidarity among children and adults, to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, and to support reintegration of formerly abducted children back into their communities;
- engaging in consultations on Agenda 3 of the peace talks on accountability and reconciliation and influencing the preparations of the peace agreement.<sup>126</sup>

A clear example of the impact children had on reconciliation and peace talks was when a government delegation, after having read a draft report of children's views, decided to extend its consultation process by a few days so that they could directly meet with child representatives in various districts of Northern Uganda (Feinstein, Giersten, O'Kane, 2010).

## **LATIN AMERICA**

### ***National Municipal School Committees, Peru***

This project, organized mainly through schools and a Peruvian NGO called Accion por los Niños is based off of children participating in committees to discuss a range of issues facing their communities. Municipal school committees exist throughout the country run by children and adolescents. The work that children are doing in the committees and organizations connected to them, have drawn attention from media and other projects interested in children's participation and

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<sup>125</sup> Feinstein, C., Giersten, A., & O'Kane, C. (2010). Children's Participation in armed-conflict and peace building. In *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation, Perspectives from Theory and Practice* (pp. 53-62). Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p.56

views. The School Committees have even been called upon by the National Plan of Education in the past for consultation.

Children and young people not only use these committees, held in classrooms and in working groups, as a space for discussing issues, but also for taking action and proceeding with specific activities.

Included in the category of activities undertaken are:

- (1) Education, culture, and sports that includes school, press (radio, newsletter), cultural, and artistic events;
- (2) Health and the environment which involves campaigns on waste management, anti-drugs, and health prevention;
- (3) Production and services which include gardening, recycling, fundraising, maintenance, and capacity- building;
- (4) Rights of the child that include leadership-training, campaigns against sexual exploitation, maltreatment, selling of alcohol, and security.<sup>127</sup>

Much of the program includes giving young people the chance to enhance democratic practices because they come up with activities that involve decision-making processes and reflect on issues that affect all citizens including themselves.

One young person, John Ludeña Cárdenas, a School Mayor of the Educative Centre Antonio Raimondi, explains:

I have learned to develop intellectually, to socialize with my peers and with the important people in my community. Thanks to this, we as mayors know the problems of other young people of our country and in this way identify solutions. I have been able to develop my sense of democracy and solidarity. I have learned a lot which will help me in the future.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Cook, P., Blanchet-Cohen, N. & Hart, S. (2004). *Children as Partners: Child Participation Promoting Social Change*. The International Institute for Child Rights and Development-IICRD, (prepared for The Canadian International Development Agency- CIDA). p.28

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p.29

## ***Children and Youth Volunteering in Latin America***

Volunteering means working freely to improve conditions and make positive changes. UNICEF (2010) produced a report on “Adolescent Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean” where they delve further into positive aspects of child and youth volunteerism with some concrete examples. Volunteering can have many faces, from working with big organizations to participating in local grassroots initiatives.

### ***Uruguay***

Puentes Sur is an NGO in Uruguay working with over 100 young people between the ages of 17 and 23 in small villages and rural neighborhoods. They use a non-formal educational method to give training to young people on many different issues including sexual and reproductive health and participation in society. “Adolescents then plan and manage their own community volunteer activities and programs (UNICEF, 2010, p12).” In this way, young people are choosing to participate in society through volunteer programs.

### ***Panama Verde Program***

The Panama Verde Program is a national environmental network managed by young people between the ages of 12 and 29, mostly from rural areas in Panama. The organization was founded in 1996 under the Peace Corps, but became an independent NGO in 2004. Today there are at least 33 environmental groups run by young people around the country. They work on environmental sustainability and development.

As we have seen before, children and young people are able to bring their own expertise and knowledge into the project to make it more efficient.

Each Panama Verde group in a community is able to adapt to local needs, as the adolescent volunteers that live in these communities know the community needs and can prioritize solutions.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> UNICEF. (2010) What Works. Finding their voice: engaging adolescents in meaningful participation strategies. Adolescent participation in Latin America and the Caribbean. Panama City: UNICEF. p.13

Aside from young people participating in planning activities related to environmental issues, the program also provides them with training on citizenship and on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### ***Chile, Un Techo Para Mi País***

Un Techo Para Mi País is an NGO, founded in 1997, that works with adults and adolescent volunteers on building quality affordable housing for the poorest in urban areas. Although their work started in Chile, they have made such an impact and been so successful that their work now extends to 15 Latin American countries. It has engaged thousands of volunteers, many of whom are adolescents, to help in solidarity with those less fortunate. So far, many of the young people involved have come from educated middle and upper class families, so there has been a shortfall in inciting volunteers from lower income families. However, the young volunteers interact with all different social classes building solidarity together.

The adolescent volunteers do a process of reflection on their experience in this program in order to assess its impact on their personal and professional life. Initial studies are showing that these young volunteers are greatly affected by the program and continue to work on behalf of the poorest living in dense urban areas.<sup>130</sup>

One can imagine that such volunteer activities not only establish feelings of solidarity and compassion, but also shape young people into adults who are more aware of their surroundings and more sensitive to finding solutions to existing problems.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p.13

## CONCLUSION

One might notice that the majority of the theory and evidence provided here on how children's participation leads to development has been positive and encouraging. While it's important to be optimistic and hopeful, one also needs to be realistic. There are many obstacles and limits to children's participation. In addition, it is often difficult to quantifiably measure and evaluate the quality of children's participation. Tools do exist now that can be points of reference, such as the UNCRC, A Toolkit on Monitoring and Evaluation prepared by Save the Children, or basic requirements for children's participation provided in varying reports by UNICEF and Save the Children. However useful these tools may be though, they too have limits in providing clear evidence on the effectiveness of children's participation.

To add to that, even the most well intentioned individuals or organizations may sometimes fall into tokenistic approaches, perhaps even without realizing it initially. This means that a change in structure and framework of organizations, as well as individuals' mindsets is crucial if we are to make children's participation a regular part of life.

Children's participation in development, while increasing in popularity among NGOs and child experts, is still far from where it should be and what the UNCRC outlines as a basic right to every child. Inspirational examples can be found of children changing their lives and their communities around the world, but they often remain grassroots and stagger in terms of having a larger impact on a global level. It's a question of getting more people on board in accepting the benefits of children's participation and sharing this knowledge.

Time is also an important factor. Children and youth today live in an ever-changing globalized world. Children have many more opportunities in this day and age than their parents had or their parents before them. This connects to changing perceptions of childhood and the changing roles of children, who now often represent a "high-tech" and "connected" generation, practically born with smart phones and tablets in their hands. These perceptions differ of course in different regions of the world. Nonetheless, in many cases, adults look to children and young people as new experts in social networking and information technology. All of this as many of the world's problems including poverty, violence, and hunger continue hindering the dignity of people around the world.

Children and young people are the people of today, and the people of tomorrow. Working hand in hand with them can only improve our situation and multiply the solutions we discover together. Recognizing them as competent partners is not only their right, but in the interest of everyone. In order for democracy to be genuine, all citizens need to take part in society and hold their governments accountable. Including children and young people in decision-making and all parts of life is the path towards development, prosperity and all-inclusive societies.

The last 40 years have proven to be beneficial in recognizing children's rights and children's participation, however, the last 10 years have staggered in terms of moving forward international initiatives. Since the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002, there have been few examples of international meetings dedicated to children with concrete outcomes and planned actions. It's time to for world leaders, representatives of NGOs, child experts from different fields, and most importantly, children and young people, to come together once again, to discuss the world's most pressing issue. Through such a meeting, and through other initiatives, we can make a new plan on how children and adults together, as partners for change, can work to make our societies a better place for everyone.

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