



Implementing children and young people's participation in decision-making: The role of non-governmental organisations

This briefing addresses how children and young people's¹ participation in decision-making at the community level can be meaningfully supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), using research findings from Tamil Nadu (in South India) and Scotland (UK).

Background

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the most ratified human rights convention. Only the USA has not yet ratified the UNCRC. Article 12 of the UNCRC recognises children's right to participate in decisions that affect them. Since the UNCRC's ratification, children and young people's participation has been encouraged by many initiatives in schools and in communities. However, the way children and young people participate in decision-making is often problematic in practice. Many participatory initiatives have been developed across different countries and contexts, but often without a clear definition of what children and young people's participation is (Lansdown 2014).

In 2009, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (a group of independent experts who monitor the implementation of the UNCRC) clarified the term 'participation' as:

Ongoing processes, which include information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. (CRC/C/GC/12 para 3)

In practice, including children and young people in decision-making can raise challenges that frustrate children, young people and adults. It is recognised that children and young

Key points

- Children and young people's participation often results in their views being heard, but not taken account of or acted on in decision-making processes.
- Decision-making processes in local communities should involve children and young people directly. To make this happen, facilitators (staff members from non-governmental organisations) can support more meaningful dialogue between adult decision-makers and children and young people.
- The three-point relationship between children and young people, facilitators and adults in power can be used to strengthen bottom-up processes for children and young people's participation. These relationships should take account of diversity amongst adults and social hierarchies.
- Adults in power (decision-makers) should be involved from the beginning of the process when implementing participation projects.
- To effect meaningful change in matters that affect them, children and young people's participation should be embedded within existing adult decision-making mechanisms.
- As part of the participation process, facilitators should advocate for the adaptation of existing decision-making mechanisms to accommodate children and young people's meaningful involvement.

¹The term 'children and young people' is used in this work to refer to people under the age of 18, as defined in Article 1 of the UNCRC.

people generally have positive experiences of participation but that their views have little impact to no impact on decision-making (Tisdall et al 2014). Indeed, children and young people's participation processes "have sought to raise the voices of children and young people as an end in itself, rather than a means to achieve positive transformational change" (Johnson 2015: 159). Children and young people's participation has often been promoted as if children and young people are autonomous in participation processes while adults are invisible (Wyness 2015).

Recent developments in the field promote approaches that recognise the respective roles of children and young people and adults, and how they relate to each other, within the process of decision-making to allow children and young people to participate effectively. This has been referred to as a 'relational approach' taking account of child-adult relationships (Wyness 2015: 133, see also Mannion 2007) and follows the view that children and young people should not be regarded as autonomous and detached subjects, but as living in networks of relationships involving both children and young people and adults (Moss and Petrie 2002).

The study

This research explored how two NGOs involved children and young people in making decisions that affect them within the local community. The study also looked at what helped and what hindered the children and young people's effective participation.

The research was an exploratory study with two case studies – an NGO in Tamil Nadu, India and an NGO in Scotland – which had similar purposes in implementing children and young people's participation. Both NGOs had more than 10 years' experience of delivering children and young people's participation projects. In the Tamil Nadu case study, the NGO sought to identify community issues and to support children to write petition material to local decision-makers. The children and young people in Tamil Nadu used the petitions process to address issues in their community that they felt were particularly important by writing letters, collecting signatures from children and young people and sometimes from adults, and sending these to the local decision-makers. Kathira² (16 years old) shared that she and other children and young people in her community were able to get the local decision-makers to build toilets and provide access to drinking water in the slum by writing a petition in this way.

In the Scottish case study, the NGO supported a community photography project for children and young people to help them express what they like and what they do not like in their community. Both case studies involved observations, informal discussions and semi-structured interviews with children and

young people aged 13 to 16 years old and staff members from the NGOs. Relevant documents were obtained and scrutinised. In total, 48 participants took part in the research project³.

Findings

From analysis of the research data, six key areas were identified that have practical implications.

Different goals: In the Tamil Nadu case study, children and young people acted in the 'here and now' to claim their rights at the community level. They sought to make small changes in the local community quickly. The Scottish case study tried to shift thinking: the organisation hoped to change adults' views about children and young people's involvement in decision-making by encouraging discussion, and chose creative art projects as the main mechanism to do so.

Variations in practices: In the Tamil Nadu case study, children and young people were encouraged to talk about their rights in relation to everyday issues in their lives. The focus of the Tamil Nadu NGO was to bring about real change in the local community, such as improved access to drinking water. In the Scottish case study, children and young people focused on their needs and rights in relation to the UNCRC: e.g. to have a say, a right to freedom, and to privacy. They participated in a photography project to identify what they liked about their community as well as areas of concern, such as graffiti. While there was no mechanism for children and young people's views to be acted upon appropriately in the 'here and now', a final exhibition project provided an opportunity for open discussion between children and young people and adults.

Implicit dismissal of children and young people by adults in power: In both case studies, there were occasions when children and young people were acting, but adults were not actively listening to them. In the Tamil Nadu case study, children and young people had access to adults in power in the community (local leaders and municipal councillors) through arranged meetings, but children and young people were sometimes placated with sweets and their views were ignored. In the Scottish case study, access to adults in power was limited. Children and young people had the opportunity to express their views to decision-makers through informal meetings such as exhibitions, but interviews with both NGO staff and child and young people participants suggest that children and young people's views had no discernable impact on subsequent community decision-making processes.

Exploring the hierarchical social order within and outwith the NGO: In the Tamil Nadu case study, staff were anxious at the thought of being misjudged by the management team and jeopardising their jobs. As a result, staff did not express their



²Pseudonym is used.

³More information regarding the methodology and ethical considerations can be found in the full thesis (Le Borgne 2016).

own concerns and training needs about facilitating participation, leading them to repeat more hierarchical patterns of directing children and young people, familiar from schooling.

In the Scottish case study, staff felt subject to the whims of funders, with concerns that funding would not be renewed and thus the work with children and young people would be discontinued.

Direct contact with adults in power: In the Tamil Nadu case study, children and young people expressed social competencies through negotiation, and claimed their rights from adults at the community level by engaging in meaningful social action. In the Scottish case study, children and young people's social competencies were less visible as they presented their creative work to adults in the community at the end of the project; no formal mechanisms were established to have these issues taken into account by adults in power. This suggests that involving adults in power from the beginning of processes, rather than only at the end, might better maximise the impact of participation projects.

The role of the facilitator in children and young people's participation: The way in which children and young people's participation is put into practice can weaken the impact of participatory activities. For example, in the Tamil Nadu case study, some facilitators still perceived their role of guidance through the lens of 'teacher', whereas in the Scottish case study facilitators sought to construct an alternative approach, having more equal relationships with the children and young people by distinguishing themselves from the traditional education system.

Conclusion

The research suggests that policy making should include more collaborative work and meaningful activities with children and young people to support them to express their views directly to policy-makers, to enable real dialogue about the issues in children's everyday lives. Children and young people's meaningful participation in decision making processes can be achieved through three-point relationships that include children and young people, adults in power (local decision-makers), and a facilitator (an NGO staff member). The role of facilitator is pivotal, and should be strengthened; it is key to generating more dialogue between local decision-makers and children and young people in communities, and to establishing a consensus on the agenda and aims of the process. It is too simplistic to consider the relational approach only through the lens of child-adult relationships. There is also a need to look at the different roles amongst adults who participate in the project and hierarchies within and outside of the NGO. The three-point relationship can be considered a possible solution to strengthening bottom-up processes for children and young people's participation.

Participatory activities need to go further than simple discussions with decision-makers. True dialogue between adults and children and young people needs to be established to create serious discussion that will have impact in the

community. With impact demonstrated, children and young people's participation will be purposeful and children and young people will not be disenchanted by involvement without impact. Children and young people's participation should be a means to an end (children and young people influencing decision-making) and not an end in itself (only for the process's sake). The practices of participation conclude to the direct involvement of children and young people in decision-making in their local communities through the petition process (Tamil Nadu case study) and not only as 'asking opinions' of children and young people (Scottish case study) to implement children and young people's participation.

Policy and practice implications

- **NGOs should nurture their relationships with local decision-makers:** The role of NGO staff members in making and sustaining productive relationships and exchanges with local decision-makers is crucial to ensuring space for children and young people to be heard and taken into account.
- **Apply the three-point relationship in children and young people's participation:** Adult policy makers should be involved in the process of children and young people's participation from the start of the project. Collaborative three-point relationships should be facilitated by NGO staff (free from potential conflict of interest) within a joint project between children and young people and adults in power.
- **Invest in the skills of the facilitator:** Facilitators (NGO staff members) need training on how to facilitate participative processes with children and young people and decision-makers; how to support children and young people in engaging with local decision-makers regarding community issues and vice versa; and how to use a range of communication methods and techniques to help children and young people and decision-makers communicate with each other. The facilitator should assist children and young people in their participation by developing the knowledge and skills required for different situations. This includes, for example, assisting children and young people in discussions regarding collective meaningful social action they wish to bring to local decision-makers.
- **Use of adult mechanisms, not child-specific mechanisms:** Children and young people's participation should be embedded within the structure and processes of existing adult decision-making mechanisms, rather than appended child-specific mechanisms, thereby allowing children and young people to have a direct impact on the decisions that affect them. Indeed, in the Tamil Nadu case study, children and young people used the established mechanisms of the adults' petition process used by adults to claim their rights in the community. This example shows that adult decision making mechanisms can and should be flexible to adapt to the participation of children and young people with the support of the facilitator.

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