

Integrating children's participation into community life

The key to sustainable child participation is the creation of structures that empower children within their families and communities. The types of structures will depend on the context in which the children live and the type of participation used.

Several options are presented here:

CHILDREN'S CLUBS are a way of enabling children and the organisation working with them to explore approaches to participation. Children's clubs provide a safe place for children to learn, play, and carry out activities that benefit their communities. The interests of the children should direct the club's activities. Clubs fit well within a community development approach.

CHILDREN'S MOVEMENTS AND NETWORKS provide children with the opportunity to organise, plan and carry out actions to meet their needs and concerns.

CHILDREN'S COUNCILS try to influence decision-making at the community level.

CHILDREN'S PARLIAMENTS provide opportunities for children's voices to be heard at state or national level.

CHILDREN'S CLUBS

Children's clubs have become a popular way to encourage participation. They provide children with a safe place to express themselves. Examples of children's clubs can be found in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Malawi and many other countries. These clubs have been successful, not only among poor rural and urban children, but also with street-working children. The clubs are easy to set up and enable children to experiment with joint decision-making, planning, action and leadership.

CASE STUDY
CHISOMO, Malawi.
 A children’s club –
 not a club for
 children

Living Waters Church set up Chisomo, a children’s club, in 1998. Children in Malawi generally have little status or influence on decisions affecting them. Until Chisomo started, no government policy addressed the needs of street children.

Children living and working on the streets of Blantyre established the club’s identity. From the start, its identity was based on building relationships of trust with children and their families and working with them to address their own problems, guided by the power and wisdom of God. The children designed the logo and named the club themselves, saying, *‘This has been the best day of our lives. Truly it is the grace of God.’* (Chisomo means ‘grace’.)

Maintaining good participation is a challenge. The club aims to keep a level of participation in which staff and children work together to bring change. This is sometimes initiated by adults and sometimes by children. There is a danger that the level of participation might slip to one of mere consultation where staff design the programmes and then consult the children. Chisomo would then become a club *for* children rather than a club *owned by* children. The children would start to think of the club as there to provide for them and their dependency would increase.

CHISOMO VALUES

- Put children first
- Long-term change
- Relationships of trust
- Excellence
- Participation
- Justice
- Acceptance and love
- God’s involvement



Photo: Jim Loring

The struggle to maintain an identity based on genuine child participation does not end. It depends on a constant return to the club’s underlying values.

Other examples

- The Child Brigade in Bangladesh is a very active group of street-working children that is organised and led by the children themselves. They have developed their own literacy materials to help other children like them to learn to read and write. They also help children who have been arrested or harassed by the police.
- In war-affected eastern Sri Lanka, a children’s club developed in a small community trapped between the armed resistance movement and the government forces. It developed slowly in order to be sensitive to the local culture. The club has been responsible for bringing friends back into school, expanding the school building, and involving government in providing access to education.
- Save the Children Norway is working with more than 400 community-based children’s clubs in different parts of Nepal. The clubs are involved in raising social issues affecting children’s lives and in advocacy work to bring in social changes through a child-to-child approach. Save the Children Norway is also working with the Hatemalo Child Club in advocacy work at the national level. It raises issues based on the experiences and views of the children’s clubs at the grassroots level. The Hatemalo Child Club’s media group is involved in raising issues concerning children for public debate through radio broadcasts in central and other regions of Nepal. It also raises general public awareness using posters and street drama.

Reflection

- What children's clubs do we know of in our country?
- List the benefits of children's clubs.
- How can we ensure that children's clubs are *owned by* and not just *for* children?

CHILDREN'S MOVEMENTS AND NETWORKS

Children's movements and networks provide a space for children from clubs or other organised groups to come together at a local, national or international level. The movement or network often has a specific goal or thematic focus. For example, working children might want to raise awareness about their rights, or children might want to campaign for peace. A movement or network usually requires joint facilitation and collaboration among the organisations working with these children.

CASE STUDY

The Children's Network (Red de Niños) of Colombia

The Children's Network of Colombia has brought together children affected by the conflict and violence in that country. Children from different regions select representatives to advocate on specific issues that concern them. For example:

- writing a letter to the churches in Colombia, urging them to work on specific issues that concern children
- presenting the concerns of children at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children, especially to officials from Colombia
- raising awareness about child rights in their communities
- campaigning for peace and for the release of those kidnapped by paramilitary and guerrilla forces at local level.

CASE STUDY

Bhima Sangha: Working Children's Union

Ramachandran and Saihjee (2001)

The organisation Concerned for Working Children (CWC) in Karnataka state, South India, has worked with working children for many years. CWC helped to form a working children's union called Bhima Sangha. Bhima Sangha enables working children to participate in local village councils and to raise awareness of issues facing working children at national and international levels. It has a current membership of 25,000 working children.

The objective of Bhima Sangha is to provide opportunities for working children to discuss issues with each other and those around them in order to gain a collective and visible identity as workers. The Bhima Sangha has been central to CWC's strategy of reaching out to working children, talking to them and enabling them to express their fears, concerns and dreams. It has provided the children with an opportunity to talk to each other – about the circumstances that have forced them to become child workers, why they left school, and their hopes for the future.

CASE STUDY
MANTHOC,
 the Movement of
 Working Children of
 Christian Workers,
 Peru

MANTHOC consists of about 2,000 working children in over 130 communities across Peru. The organisation is divided into groups of 10–30 children. These groups work with adults, who help them to develop plans and activities that meet their specific needs. These include:

- Education: alternative forms of school to fit with their work schedules
- Vocational training and promoting the development of small businesses
- A focus on health education
- Community cafeterias to help improve the nutrition of poor children in the community.

The groups send representatives to meetings at departmental and national levels once a year. The process enables the children to present proposals for policy change at national and international levels that would benefit working children.

Reflection

- What children's movements and networks exist in our country?
- What are the benefits of children's movements and networks?
- What are the barriers to effective children's movements and networks? How might these be overcome?

CHILDREN'S COUNCILS

It can be a great challenge to enable child participation in decision-making at a local level. The creation of a formal space for children in village councils or development committees can be a significant step in achieving this.

CASE STUDY
Makkala
panchayats
 India
 CWC (2002)

The Concerned for Working Children and Bimha Sangha, the Working Children's Union, negotiated with local authorities the creation of village level representation for children. As a result, *makkala panchayats* (children's councils) were developed. The *makkala panchayats* have representation on the village *panchayats*.

Members of the *makkala panchayats* carry out door-to-door surveys to obtain accurate information about children in the village. They use various research tools to find out the issues and needs of children in their communities. This information is used to plan strategies and lobby for specific actions in their village *panchayat*. This could be related to education, working children, health and infrastructure needs such as footbridges, schools and nursery schools.

For the children involved, participation is not just an opportunity to take part in meetings, to be consulted occasionally, or to sing a song at an opening ceremony. For them, participation helps them to advocate for their own needs and transform their situations. Participation means taking a leading role.

Reflection

- What opportunities do children have to contribute their views in our communities?
- What decision-making structures exist in the communities we work with, in which children could be encouraged to participate?
- How can we help children to take part in decision-making in communities?

CHILDREN'S PARLIAMENTS

Children's parliaments are national representative forums for children in which they can discuss policy and advocacy issues. Their goal is to create a voice for children at a political level so that the interests of children are promoted in discussions about policy.

CASE STUDY
 The Children's
 Parliament of
 Bangladesh

Save the Children Australia supported children in forming a children's parliament in Bangladesh. This gives children space and opportunity to voice their opinions. The Children's Parliament is a national forum of children, which allows children to tell their concerns to the members of the Bangladesh Parliament. The purpose of the Children's Parliament is to influence policy makers to develop pro-child policies and consider the development of Bangladeshi children.

Before deciding the national budget, the finance minister often receives many studies, reports and requests from special interest groups. But children's concerns are rarely heard. As a result, the needs and priorities of children are not always reflected in the national budget.

The Children's Parliament Preparatory Committee organised a Children's Budget Discussion Session in June 2003 during the budget planning session of the Bangladesh Parliament. A total of 68 children from all over Bangladesh participated in the budget discussion, where the children called for an appropriate budget allocation for their survival, development and protection.

Reflection

- What are the advantages of children's parliaments?
- What activities would be needed to set up an effective children's parliament?