

Towards Rights-Based Child Participation in Governance

Organizational Transition at Save the Children in Sri Lanka and Emerging Children's Agency

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Part I – An Introduction

Signing/ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an acknowledgement of a spectrum of children's rights, including their right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, the basis of realizing all other rights. Translating this vision into practice is a challenge that the development sector in Sri Lanka is gradually taking on as its vision for children's rights. Participation in "governance" referred to in the title also refers to the shift of focus from other forms of decorative, tokenistic and adult-led child participation to empowered and informed participation in decision-making in public and private domains including families, communities, and local, national and international governance.



"Children can hold a cigarette within their two fingers, but they can't hold a pen within their three fingers to write". A child from a Southern plantation speaks at a child-led research presentation to her community on the effects of alcoholism and smoking.

For child rights practitioners, the transition from needs-based programming to rights-based programming, commonly known as child rights programming, is predicated on a

commitment to ensuring rights-based child participation across their work. The multiple marginalization of children not just as poor people, girls, those with disability and so on, but as disenfranchised minors, makes this empowerment even more urgent. This is a moral responsibility of the development sector in a national context of increasing disparities between the rich and poor, militarized conflict resolution, polarized ethnic politics, and national structures that often disable community and children's participation.

For Save the Children in Sri Lanka, the experience created through a capacity building process in rights-based child participation in governance throughout 2008 created a paradigm shift in the organization's real and potential child participation practices. The conclusions of this exercise not only have implications for this child rights organization, but for an entire culture of child participation in governance. Incorporating these practices in to everyday child rights development work holds potential for a more egalitarian and non-discriminatory national culture of which the bedrock is community and children's participation.

This article is written with the goal of understanding the "unlearning", shifts in mindsets, knowledge, and real and potential changes in development practice created in staff, partners, children and communities resulting from the capacity building exercise and the implications on approaches to work for a range of actors including non-governmental, governmental and civil society stakeholders¹. It will also provide ten recommendations on ways forward implied by the observations of the process.

The Capacity Building Initiative and Dhruva

The capacity building initiative on rights-based child participation in governance was undertaken by Save the Children in 2008, with Dhruva, the consultancy wing of the Concerned for Working Children (CWC), an Indian organization with their registered office in Bangalore (Karnataka) known worldwide for championing child participation. Save the Children in Sri Lanka undertook this process as a bid to strengthen/transform existing organizational child participation cultures and practices into more rights-based interventions. Considerable child participation initiatives prevailed within the organization, and within Sri Lanka including in child-led advocacy, prior to this exercise. Yet, a pre-capacity building assessment of the organization's and national practices conducted by Dhruva found that in spite of the strides made, these efforts have often proven to be sporadic, non-sustainable, and not built on genuine children's empowerment through information provision and building collective strength.

Dhruva was selected as the facilitators in consideration of their impressive experience in building capacities of organizations in the area of rights-based children's participation globally, drawn from experiences of CWC's work of facilitating *Bhima Sangha*, a union of working children in Karnataka, who have been actively involved in lobbying and advocating at the local, national and international level on children's rights, and setting up *makkala panchayats*² (*makkala* meaning children in Kannada) who lobby with local government and other decision-makers to find solutions to their problems.

¹ This article does not attempt to elucidate on tools and methodologies of the capacity building process, which are available at Save the Children in Sri Lanka for interested parties.

² A children's version of the adult panchayats, the Indian form of village committees. The children's panchayat is not, however, yet mandated by law even though steps are being taken by Dhruva to do so.

The capacity building programme consisted of an initial assessment of child participation practices in Sri Lanka by Dhruva within and outside the organization; a review of national provisions in terms of laws, policies and programmes for children and existing structures within the country; workshop-setting training for senior managers; and field staff with partners; and mentoring in the field. The mentoring involved instituting child-led organizations, children advocating for change, and children functioning as research protagonists. The capacity building process took on a deliberative, rather than directive approach that encouraged staff, partners and children to revisit and debate assumptions and arrive at what they felt was “right” *through* this process rather than through didactic “teaching”.

Part II - Rights-Based Child Participation in Action – The Context

The Mentoring Sites and the Children

The mentoring took place in the districts of Matara, Batticaloa and Vavuniya with the objective of staff and partners of Save the Children, and children themselves, receiving hands-on guidance from the Dhruva consultants on initiating and sustaining rights-based child participation. The focus in this article is on Matara and Batticaloa³ where around 40 and 200 children respectively, in addition to staff, partners and communities, participated in the exercise which focused on child-led organization building, advocacy and child-led research.

The first group under discussion here is a community of labourers and their children from three privately-owned plantations in Southern Sri Lanka, inland of the Matara district. The area is remote, poorly served, and was selected through a poverty mapping exercise⁴ conducted by the Save the Children team in Matara. There is a high prevalence of often exploitative child labour, lack of access to any form of education, and certain levels of “racial” prejudice, and un/intentional effacing of identity⁵. Children were often illiterate but streetwise. The second group is yet another poorly-served community about one hour’s drive away from Batticaloa city. The imprints left by war and militarization are explicitly visible, with children on the one hand serving armed groups in many forms and, on the other, their worldviews showing a deeply entrenched fear of militarism and annihilation⁶.

Towards Building Agency

In the beginning, the mere congregation of the children for the mentoring process was an attraction in itself. Yet, the transformation created in the children during the sessions with

³ The mentoring in Vavuniya, which is not part of this article, looked at mainstreaming rights-based child participation within the existing structures. It will be the theme of a separate article.

⁴ An analytical tool introduced by Dhruva to Save the Children for a holistic assessment of poverty covering political, economic, social, cultural and geographical/environmental poverty.

⁵ Being a minority within a majority, these children often had no access to schools which taught in the medium of their mother tongue, denying them their language rights. They went instead to Sinhala-medium schools and were often more proficient in Sinhala than in Tamil. Children faced discrimination in communities and schools as Tamil children, as plantation children, and then, also, as children.

⁶ In Batticaloa, marginalization was most explicit for non-schooling children and children associated with armed groups. The single faith-based children’s home was also a location in which institutionalized children were marginalized from the rest. When children were told to draw what their vision for their village was in five years, one child said “there will be nobody there in the village in five years”, reflecting fears of armed conflict annihilating their village.

Dhruva was remarkable. The space for gathering later became a place that enabled them to analyze their own situations, realize the strength of collective action, and approach their communities with a new sense of information, knowledge and activism. Those that came in seeing themselves as individuals, left after seven days with the conviction among themselves as a group, and of their collective strength.

In Batticaloa, in a context where a few of the relatively more literate and privilege children had formerly attended a Save the Children children's club, now, almost all children participated in a seven day exercise *led by one of the most marginalized groups in the community* – non-school going children⁷, the lack of schooling/education also being an indicator for many other forms of rights violations. This approach was key to *involving all children, yet allowing the most marginalized visibility and agency*. These children had also been formerly marginalized within the village in NGO-led interventions but emerged as a group needing attention through the poverty-mapping exercise. This “prioritization” enabled the non-school going children to lead a process without being “labelled” non-school going and to take leadership in involving other children in it. As one Save the Children staff member commented “These children did not come to our children's club gatherings in the past. Now we see the right group has been chosen for our work.” And as one partner commented, “earlier, we didn't look at what *kind* of children were coming to the gatherings, but now we are considering this”.

The potential for rights-based child participation is great within these communities purely because of the urgent need for a change in circumstances that flagrantly violate the rights of children. As the Dhruva consultants highlighted both in theory and practice throughout the capacity building programme, children from disadvantaged communities develop a much stronger sense of personhood arising from extreme marginality and the need for survival (see box below). In this context too, the poorer-resourced communities were, the richer the sense of articulation of marginality and deprivation. However, this personhood could also have potentially destructive and negative characteristics that need to be nurtured into positive energies. These energies, that are coping strategies built by children to manage situations of oppression, conflict, or abuse, are also counterproductive when “normalcy” is restored and do not help conflict resolution. This is why children need positive and constructive forums where they can be involved, participate and contribute to.

⁷ Several dynamics had prevented non-school going children joining the traditional children's clubs. One was the fear of being forced to enroll in schools, a fear previously openly expressed by children to staff members. The rights-based child participation work, on the other hand, held no assumptions about school being the best thing for children. School was not discussed, but the issues they faced were, including education. Working with this set of non-school going children then enabled staff to distinguish between education versus schooling, the group pleading the case for forms of empowering, relevant and responsive education that may not necessarily be provided through the conventional school structure which clashed with children's priorities of survival and income-earning.

Arul (15), (not his real name) is from one of the most underserved communities in the southern plantations. He works full time to care for his family and earn a day wage of Rs 250 on days that he's lucky enough to get work. He has never been to school, and looks more like ten than fifteen. His energy and need for expression is immense. He is looked upon with suspicion in his own community which fails to see him as a product of that very same environment, and the exploitative plantation management. As one grandmother told us "We do not want our children being friends with him. He's only a child in age. He is not really a child at all". He cannot think of schooling as he cannot "fit into" his grade because of illiteracy, and even if he was literate, he wouldn't be accepted as an equal in the classroom. At home, he gets beaten by his alcoholic father. He's discriminated against both in the village, the community and at home.

On the one hand he is angry and what he has to go through, but has dealt with remarkable survival strategies, particularly when negotiating with adults: Arul knows how to bargain with the *mudalalis* (merchants) to get the right price for empty bottles, and knows how to keep the police in their good books – they help police personnel carry their weekly market purchases home – so that children can win police cooperation should the need arise.

While children like Arul find survival strategies and coping mechanisms in these situations, negatively rebellious energies are a very likely outcome of these often degrading experiences. These energies cannot be curbed unless children like Arul are convinced that their environment is free of the forms of oppression they currently experience. *The role of development organizations working with children in these extreme circumstances is to work towards providing children with enabling, positive experiences, and helping them overcome these negative energies and re-direct potentially destructive energies towards positive forces such as informed social action, and realization of child rights.*

The gradual process of working with children to first understand forms of marginalization they faced, and then look at means of overcoming them transformed children from passive groups who accepted their condition, to children who believed it possible to change things, and found ways and means of doing so. Through the process emerged the children's latent eloquence, understanding and sensitivities.

What follows in this discussion is the learning of an organization, of partner organizations, children and communities through this initiative of transforming mindsets and practices.

Part III – Transition in Organizations, Children and Communities.

The key to the capacity building on rights-based child participation was unlearning. Unlearning many internalized attitudes and practices in development that can often obstruct, rather than enable community and children's empowerment. There were also new insights that enabled staff, partners, and children to think in novel ways of their roles

in development. Several such factors are examined below through the prism of the field work conducted in Batticaloa and Matara⁸, and in workshop contexts.

Interrogating ourselves: The basis of rights-based child participation is a commitment to principles of equity, non-discrimination and non-violent conflict resolution that cannot be taken for granted even among development practitioners. The capacity building engendered a self-critical approach to values and principles that we hold. Our perspectives on gender, disability and other forms of marginalization, and our approaches to conflict resolution were all dissected, examined, replaced or confirmed. Discussions helped staff, partners and communities perceive societies in their full complexity. As one Dhruva facilitator said, “We cannot go into communities with pre-conceived notions that there is no gender discrimination, no ethnic discrimination, and so on. We have to learn to observe discrimination. These groups of children are showing us that there is inequality”.

Assumptions about equality and upholding human rights were sometimes questionable even within development communities. For example, while development practitioners often promoted non-violent conflict resolution at the micro-level of families and communities, military means are tacitly upheld as the means of resolving macro-political differences, without necessarily seeing this as contradictory. Children too imbibed these notions of militarism, racialism and stereotyping, as they observe what adults practice. One child, in a session that spoke about leadership qualities, pointed to a Muslim girl and said “your leader” with reference to Osama Bin Laden. *This raises the importance of rights-based development organizations working towards dismantling notions of racial and other social prejudices and stigma, and reinforcing the value of non-violent conflict resolution and the importance of these principles during programming, as well as in staff recruitment and staff inductions.*

Children’s status: How we perceive children’s status is key to working with them as equal partners in realizing child rights. From the beginning, children were seen as a constituency, a group of rights-holding citizens, rather than “beneficiaries” or “evidence groups” terms which detract from children’s agency.

Central to the process of reaffirming children’s equal status was unpacking the way adults build relationships with children involved in organizational programmes and changing internalized perceptions of power relations between adults and children. As we emphasize the notion of children’s equality with adults, we at the same time resort to orthodox relationships with children that reinforce a status of “benefactor” on adults.

A key practice that was discussed extensively both in the field and in the workshop environments was that of forms of greeting between adults and children, even within development practice, which in themselves indicated an imbalance of power, such as children falling at adult’s feet in greeting. While deconstruction of the practice exposes these elements of inequity, in orthodox culture, it is merely a sign of children’s “respect” for adults (but not vice versa). Finally, the “handshake” and the “hug”, albeit “western”,

⁸ This is not to say however, that concepts of community and children’s mobilization were new to the organization, but that the translation of its practice needed more consolidation in organizational policy, planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

were agreed on as more mutual forms of greeting based on equality and changes in interaction were already witnessed among children and adults.

Many such children's roles indicating the subservience of children to adults were discussed, including children's decorative roles at adult-led "children's" events, assumptions of adult's unconditional access to children's spaces without children's consent, and "herd management" of children. *The conclusion of these discussions at various settings was that if a practice is seen as unsuitable for adults, then in a context of rights-based child participation, it is not suitable for children either.*

Reassessing marginality: We also revisited assumptions about children's marginality and poverty. Already existing analytical frames for poverty, marginality and non-discrimination have been strengthened through the introduction of a more comprehensive poverty mapping tool that enables a holistic analysis of *political* (are they heard in political contexts and do political and administrative decisions consider their demands?), *economic* (are they economically empowered in a sustainable, empowering manner?), *social* (are they socially empowered and able to participate in mainstream social activities?), *cultural* (are they ethnically, religiously and linguistically able to assert their identities?), and *geographic/environmental* (are they in environmentally sustainable situations, in geographically accessible regions?) poverty.

The locations chosen for the interventions have many implications for the organization's programme practices. *Rigorous poverty mapping enabled the organization, partners and communities to identify locations for programme work that can be confidently said to represent the 10% most marginalized in Sri Lanka, and, moreover, understand aspects of multiple marginality **within** already marginalized communities.*

For in spite of the attempts at inclusion during the mentoring process, it became clear that there were yet children who were falling outside the process, such as children formerly or presently associated with armed groups, children in institutions, or children working full time. They were at worst actively disallowed access to children's spaces either by caregivers (children in institutions) or even by participating communities (children associated with armed groups), or, at best, unintentionally left out because they were simply not available during programming hours (children working full-time). In one location, children formerly associated with armed groups, for example, observed the process "from the outside" as access was disallowed them by communities, even as they helped bring in food and water for the congregated children. This challenged many assumptions including 1) our own sense of non-discrimination and equity, and 2) that of former child combatants as hardened and insensitive, and only that. This indicates the complexity of real inclusion and non-discrimination.

As one staff member pointed out about the planning process, "while we were already working with internally displaced persons (IDPs), the poverty mapping exercise helped us identify children who were marginalized even within this group, such as children seen to be from "lower" castes" within IDPs".

Bottom-up planning: While in theory, bottom-up planning is an essential dimension of modern development practice, in practice, these participatory interventions may often be limited. The capacity building process questioned prevailing planning practices within the

non-governmental sector⁹. How far are we able to address children's priority needs within the thematic parameters set down, often by global programming? How do we ensure a convergence between global and organizational priorities and children's priorities? In programming often driven by donors, how do we ensure that children's priorities become donor priorities? How do we lobby donors to this end? Can we assume that children's priorities are automatically the priorities of donors and non-governmental organizations?

A key to the answer is *how* priorities are set. Current practices of "consultation" with children prior to planning was discussed and deconstructed during the process. "Consultation" in itself, the forum concluded, does not constitute participation. Curbing child participation beyond consultation brings with it the danger of sidelining children's priorities for the sake of sector-bound organizational and donor-driven agendas. As one member of a partner organization said, 'Organizations generally do what they want. Now I have learnt how people can identify their own problems and find their own solutions'. One child said during the capacity building process: "Adults never ask us what our problem is, and the solutions don't always help".

Consensus was reached that bottom-up planning is when children's plans become our plans. This consensus was reflected in the planning for 2009 within Save the Children (which was informed by the capacity building process) where children not only prioritized their issues, but provided their own plans for addressing these issues, which were or will be incorporated into the organization's plans in the following manner:

1. Supporting children build **child-led organizations** through which they claim their rights – In this venture, capacity building children is at our cost, but other than this, service provision costs are minimal.
2. Supporting children on **advocacy and negotiation** with state and other actors – this could entail enhancing children's understanding of government duty bearers and their roles and responsibilities, policies and practices related to children, and ensuring long-term linkages including organizational advocacy to enhance child participation in state processes and mechanisms.
3. Supporting children through **service delivery for most urgent needs** or to **demonstrate best practice** through own organization or other responsible body – this could be to ensure that children's urgent survival and protection needs are met to prevent serious forms of harm or for advocacy on identified best practice.
4. **Re-directing rights-based empowerment** to other stakeholders where Save the Children does not have the expertise or capacity to handle a particular issue.
5. Supporting children to participate in **monitoring and evaluating** the interventions they are engaged in either independently, or with organizations, so that assessments of the success of programme work is participatory, and owned by children.

As one staff member says on the planning process for 2009 "we have incorporated child-led advocacy into the plans for this year, and really exercised the principles of poverty mapping in identifying groups of children to work with".

⁹ Sarah C White and Shayomal A Choudury in "The Politics of Child Participation in International Development – The Dilemma of Agency" describes the process of "projectization" of child participation where children are drawn *into* the projects of development agencies instead of development agencies working with children in their own spaces.

Mobilizing children: An important learning at the rights-based child participation initiative was the art of mobilizing children. How do we make an entire community become passionate about child rights and changing children's lives? The mentoring sessions in Batticaloa was an excellent demonstration of how children can be gathered and empowered to rethink their role in changing their lives, and of how children can be enabled to be visible as agents in their communities. The key was *visibility and persuasion*. Children created their own identity symbols through head bands and a "theme song"¹⁰ on marginality (recognizing problem), and how they fought marginality (empowerment to deal with the problem). They paraded the village with this song, gathering more children for their organization. This enabled awareness on children's issues, inclusion, curiosity and a sense of children's agency, in the community among both adults and children. This child-friendly approach had energy, colour and motivation in all the action that resulted in 230 children from diverse contexts in the small town gathering in the name of social change. As Dhruva facilitator Ganapathi Magalu said at the end of the mobilizing work "Today we didn't go with money, we went with respect, and it worked". And as children said "You were asking us many things about ourselves, so we came".

Right to association, democracy and representation: Mobilizing children is only the beginning. In the Dhruva philosophy, a key to sustaining children's empowerment is through child-led organization building and democratic representation. Change, according to rights-based child participation, lies in collective strength where individual strengths converge, and individual weaknesses are cancelled out. Change agents in this context are protagonists, those who advocate on their own behalf. Collective strength is realized in the form of associations, the right to association being a fundamental child right enshrined in the UNCRC.

Issues discussed by children in four communities in Batticaloa, for example, were perennial subjects such as early marriage, registration of births, alcoholism and non-schooling. But the strength here was the process that had been set in place to resolve the issues, that of child-led organization and advocacy.

Rights-based child participation enables impacting on decision-making by citizens and representation is one means to participate. Representation is key to rights-based participation. Whose voices are the least heard? Who are the most marginalized? How do we empower these groups? In the *Makkala Panchayat* or Children's *Grama Sabha* supported by the CWC for example, children have arrived at the principle of positive discrimination. For instance, in the election to the *makkala panchayats*, there are various kinds of reservations, such as those based on gender, ability, working and schooling etc. The reservation based on gender varies from 65:35 to 50:50, varying from region to region on account of various reasons.

Base Groups: reinforcing segregation or empowering the marginalized? A key debate at the sessions was around "base groups" which are fundamental to democracy and representation during the development of rights-based participation. Base groups are children with common identities/issues/problems forming their own groups for child-led advocacy. The Dhruva rationale behind the notion is that base groups enable the most

¹⁰ A song originally written and composed by Jim Jesudass of Dhruva, and adapted by children.

marginalized within the marginalized to consolidate their voices and participate more equally in a platform of many contesting constituencies and issues. However, during the capacity building, staff and partners raised fears of this process reinforcing segregation along existing barriers of gender, “ethnicity”, disability and other forms. This may be an unfounded fear. The challenge here is recognizing difference, and recognizing the potential of those with common interests - which may or may not be along gender or ethnic lines - getting their voices heard, and their issues addressed. For example, base groups in the case of the *makkala panchayats* have worked to empower working children, children with disability and girls, to organize around their own priorities. We cannot, in other words, pretend that everyone is the same, and that everyone can “integrate”, nor can we conceal difference, for each group has its own needs of self-determination and needs that may get lost in a more general platform where only the needs of the most dominant and articulate may get heard. This has been clearly evident across children’s fora in the country.

Leadership: Democratic leadership is critical to building rights-based children’s organizations. Democratic leadership in this context means leadership that functions as a conduit for indirect participation and representation of the views of the leader’s constituency. We often take certain forms of undemocratic leadership for granted. As one Dhruva facilitator observed at a capacity building process with some of the children, “They have not practiced consulting each other earlier. A few children decided for themselves and spoke without any consultation within a group”. This is clearly a reflection of forms of adult leadership children see around them every day.

Often, field practices upheld forms of leadership that were not consultative and democratic. There has been an inclination to promote and reinforce leadership by articulate children who were preoccupied with projecting themselves rather than addressing the issues. This has resulted in favouring confident and relatively more privileged representatives elected by nomination rather than election which may often detract from raising the issues of the most marginalized. Notions of participatory, consultative decision-making, respecting others’ views, delegation, and enhancing collective strength¹¹ are not parts of these kinds of leadership. As the Dhruva facilitators pointed out, quieter children may have stronger skills that go unidentified if left unexplored. During the process, children identified their own qualities for a good leader which would ultimately inform the voting in of leaders for their own child-led organizations.

The role of rights-based development organizations is to support the development of democratic leadership among children and help children overcome barriers in their personhoods that curb the development of more positive leadership qualities.

Organizational structures: A study of existing children’s organizational structures during the assessment highlighted how orthodox adult structures were being imposed on children’s groups such as children’s clubs, and how children were not provided with alternative structures that were more egalitarian, less hierarchical and was more empowering to all children within that group. *The key was giving children alternatives.* The Dhruva exercise enabled children to select from a multiplicity of possible structures

¹¹ Criteria for good leadership identified by children themselves.

ranging from a structure with a single leader, a hierarchical structure, a structure that reinforces collective leadership, and clusters of collective leadership. Within the process of child-led organization building, children mostly went for clusters of collective leadership, or collective leadership, which are often different from orthodox adult organizational structures and enables leadership that is more conducive to rights-based child participation.

Provision/Service Delivery vs. Empowerment: The process of engendering rights-based child participation in programming brought into stronger focus issues of sustaining community and child-led human rights interventions, and the relationship between development organizations and recipients of aid. How do we transition from creating dependency to creating empowerment and sustainability? How can the development agency function as the invisible catalyst to enhance child rights and empower children to realize their rights? How can we be supportive without being patronizing? Where do children need support to engage with duty bearers? Where can they function independently in child-led advocacy? Development assistance to a great extent was seen as practices that perpetuated dependency. While service delivery and community empowerment are not necessarily antithetical, the need is to shift to a focus of communities demanding and receiving services from duty bearers over simple service provision, other than in situations of urgency and emergency.

Some forms of intervention prior to this initiative have itself shown the non-sustainable nature of community mobilization interventions, for instance, cash grants, and children's clubs sustained by material provision such as libraries¹². However, there is potential in the way in which organizations, including Save the Children, have involved children in government-mandated structures such as child protection committees and school development societies which ensures longevity and sustainability, as opposed to children's engagement in relatively short-term NGO-led mechanisms. These trends, the sessions observed, have to be built on and strengthened.

Discussion also led to an analysis of existing dominant practices in gathering and working with children; i.e – children's clubs. While children's clubs provide a valuable space for children to interact in, how rights based are they if the focus was on service delivery (libraries, play material), even though these forms of interventions had its own value? How do we make these spaces more democratic and make them interface with duty bearers?

While children functioned within these groups as passive beneficiaries of aid, and implemented diverse "awareness-raising" activities in their communities with minor components of advocacy now emerging in practice, a rights-based framework was not dominant in either the structure or activities of the clubs¹³. Even the label of "children's club" was dismantled during the capacity building process, and children and adults agreed on "children's organization" as the more appropriate term to relay the meaning of children upholding the right of association and participation to claim their other rights.

¹² This clearly came out in a tsunami review of organizational projects where a children's club formerly supported through a building, a library and electricity and other forms of training, dissipated to nothing once funding was withdrawn due to the lack of attention previously paid to building structures that were sustainable and managed by local resources *in the first place*.

¹³ *Children's Club Review*, Save the Children in Sri Lanka, 2008

In the new model, the intervention is not dominantly based on provision of services, but on *capacity building children to claim their own rights, utilizing their own, locally available resources*. As Dhruva facilitator Nandana Reddy put it: “Financial support to a children’s organization is a means of killing it, of compromising children’s authority”. Provision may happen, but it’s only a means to an end, and not an end in itself.

The process will entail rethinking children’s and adults value systems perpetuated by traditional development models. A revealing instance was one child’s suggestion for bringing people together for collective action” “We will give something so they will come”, the material-resource-driven culture perpetuated by adults have also penetrated the lives of children. These are not value-free statements, but those carrying the baggage of modern development practice.

Best interest of the child and right to self-determination: A key to understanding rights-based child participation is imbibing the concept of the best interest of the child that challenges our own assumptions as staff and as adults. Deliberations during the sessions clearly showed that a solid understanding of best interests of children in all those working with children cannot be taken for granted. Children engaged in economic activity, and children and information on reproductive health were two key subjects through which the notion of best interest was discussed. Are anti-child labour campaigns in the best interest of income-earning children? Have children been consulted on what’s best for them pertaining to economic activity and their role in their family’s survival? What are the consequences to children and their families of banning child labour? Is the nature of the intervention informed by the legal position, rather than the best interest of the child?

The best interest of the child on sexual health is not ensured by “controls” but by information that ensures the child understands on her own what is good for her, and how she can protect herself in a world where children are more sexually active than adults are willing to admit. Ensuring children’s participation in these decisions also ensures that the child is empowered towards his or her right to self-determination. Realizing children’s best interest means arriving at negotiated decisions with children on an equal platform.

Right to information and negotiation skills: Children need the right information at the right time to enable meaningful negotiation with duty bearers and communities. However, what became clear during the process was that participating children, communities, and often even staff and partners need to be more conversant on roles and responsibilities of duty bearers, and need to have stronger evidence of child rights violations, to enable meaningful child participation. *It is our role, as development organizations, to give children, and our own staff, the necessary skills, such as negotiation skills, and information gathering skills (to enable ownership of information) and information, to realize children’s rights*. And information is not enough. How will this information be used to advocate, negotiate? How can we ensure that children are better able to participate in families and communities, in government mechanisms such as child protection committees, school management committees and so on? What more do we have to do to ensure that they participate in an informed manner and that their views are heard and seriously considered during the decision making process at all levels? How do we enable to children to gather their own information?

Theory Vs Practice: A key debate within the organization and partners was the implications of mobilizing children to organize and raise a collective voice in certain contexts in which Save the Children and its partners work – i.e. in context of military conflict, and in the context of children’s institutionalization. Valid concerns were raised about the safety and security of children organizing themselves in contexts where civil society organization as a whole was discouraged (militarized contexts) and where children’s visible congregation itself could become a security threat in the context of child recruitment to armed forces. In children’s institutions, children are similarly silenced by a system that is adult-driven and non-consultative. The challenge in these circumstances is finding safe spaces and strategies for children’s articulation, and finding the most feasible forms of collective action where adult organizations may have to play a greater role as mediators to protect and support children’s advocacy. It is a challenge that needs further discussion and agreement of ways of working.

Part IV - A Case Study in Children’s Research Agency

A key to children’s agency is the need for evidence-based knowledge on their own and the community’s status, to enable informed activism to realize children’s rights. In this way, child-led research into their circumstances not only enable children to own the process of information gathering and analysis, but also to more strongly convince their communities of the need for change based on the evidence they have gathered.

The following is a brief description of an information gathering and advocacy exercise in the Matara district mentoring (see box below) that brings out children’s strengths as well as diverse community dynamics, both enabling, and disabling.

The Process of Building Children’s Capacity as Research Protagonists

The key to enabling children to be research protagonists was demystifying an academic process, and bringing it close to the lives of children. This was done through discussion about children using research for change in Keradi, Karnataka, where children used research methodology to solve the problem of alcoholism in their village. The story, told through large pictures of every stage of the research discussed how children approached the issue creatively on their own, and calculated a family’s expenditure on alcohol. Then, the children conducted a needs assessment with the help of an issues bag that was taken to the communities, and later they prioritized those needs to be acted upon. These prioritized issues were the research topics per community (alcoholism, non-school going, social discrimination). Subsequently, children were facilitated in setting their research framework, designing child-friendly methodology, developing and administering tools, consolidating and analyzing the findings, and using the information to improve their lives. All this was done in language that children understood, and processes that children could relate to. The Keradi story was the constant point of reference. Feedback to communities took place once the research and analysis was over.

The critical difference in this exercise from conventional children’s research was that children were not mere informants or data collectors for the research. They governed the research. *The role of development organizations in this context is transferring*

methodologies and tools to enable children to design, implement, analyze data and create knowledge to enable advocacy for change.

The process brought out interesting dynamics among children and between children and adults. It also brought out the strength within children in analysis and eloquence. In one research location, children were able to highlight to their plantation community that adults spent on average 20% of their monthly income on alcohol. A girl child from the least resourced of the three plantations, who barely got the chance to go to school, after presenting the study, was emphatic when she said to an audience who were already stunned by the findings of the research: “Children can hold a cigarette within their two fingers, but they can’t hold a pen within their three fingers to write”. The children’s analysis looked at the opportunity cost of such non-productive expenditure, particularly in terms of expenditure on children’s education, nutrition and health, a compelling argument that jolted many gathered adults from their complacency, including the Grama Niladhari¹⁴.

The presentation of research findings also brought out other facets such as the potential solidarity between women and children in realizing human rights. As one mother at the gathering said, “Children can speak to their fathers about alcoholism, if we speak, they beat us up.” *The potential solidarity between children and youth, children and community/women’s organizations can be explored to strengthen support for children claiming their rights while at the same time keeping children’s spaces discrete.*

However, the emerging sense of activism in children within these plantation communities brings with it the danger of resistance from adults to children speaking up, as it changes power relations and agency: as one grandmother said, “This child is now publicly saying that his father drinks. His father does his best for these children. They are ungrateful”. There were clear signs that these tensions extended beyond communities, to local government bodies that provide social services to these communities. Implicit in dynamics with duty bearers was the fear of communities/children making demands on institutions that have so far conducted, or not conducted, their work without resistance.

This potential for community disharmony and state resistance during the early stages of children’s activism is one that organizations supporting children’s activism need to be aware of. *Organizations need to protect children from adverse repercussions, both physical and emotion, that may arise as a result of participation in governance issues and support children to advocate for their rights in enabling ways that ensure adult support, rather than adult antagonism. At the same time, organizations need to work with adults to create an understanding of children’s rights to participation in decisions that affect their lives and to create enabling mechanisms for them to do so.*

The presence of the *Grama Niladhari* of the village at this gathering created yet more dynamics. While one of the research topics children had chosen and worked on was that of “racial” discrimination towards Tamil children in a Sinhala community, the GN’s “speech” to the community did not acknowledge the gravity of this problem for children. In her words, “communities lived in absolute harmony here, and there’s no sense of discrimination”. But children were saying something else, which was not “heard” in the

¹⁴ The village head

same sentiment in which children were communicating their ideas. This “gap” between the experience of children of minority communities, and assumptions of adults of the majority community holding government posts, is a real one. *It is once more the role of development organizations taking on rights-based work to support children to make their voices heard in an environment built on conflicting ideologies, and the authority of a few.*

As Dhruva points out, the implications of such information management by children are, that 1) children’s participation in governance is based on appropriate information, 2) the need for information is not dependent on filtered provision by adults, 3) the control and ownership over such information is children’s and therefore children have control over it’s appropriate *use* 4) the research protagonists, being individuals affected by the problem, exploring solutions, it is guaranteed that the information generated is used to find solutions.

Part V – Implications of Rights-Based Child Participation for Rights-Based Children’s Organizations

A mere fourteen days of workshops and field work cannot undo years of conditioning about societal attitudes and practices including about the relationship between children and social change. If the rights-based child participation work is to be strengthened and support the realization of children’s rights, concerted efforts have to be made in the long term with a strategic vision of empowering children as we struggle to build an egalitarian and peaceful society. This has many implications for rights-based development organizations. How far can they support rights-based child participation to its fullest implications? The following are ten key recommendations for rights-based NGOs that we may infer from the observations in the article above:

1. **Engaging with meaningful bottom-up planning and monitoring and evaluation with children where children’s plans become our plans and where donor and organizational priorities are steered by children’s priorities.**
2. **Supporting child-led organization-building and child-led advocacy through training and support in implementation with special sensitivity to such interventions in regions of militarized conflict and within institutionalized cultures such as children’s homes.**
3. **Supporting children’s citizenship and agency through the right information on child rights and roles and responsibilities of duty bearers, enabling them to take forward their own vision for themselves through activism and advocacy.**
4. **Developing strong national, provincial and local level adult partner organizations to deliver on rights-based child participation.**
5. **Supporting staff by enhancing soft skills in dialoguing and negotiating with children, communities and other stakeholders.**
6. **Moving away from service delivery to empowerment and community mobilization through a child rights-based paradigm.**
7. **Working through holistic, integrated approaches that enable us to deal with a spectrum of child rights issues rather than perceiving programming through thematic sectors. Being able to be child rights specialists above all other specialisms!**
8. **Working with *the* most marginalized children, assessed through comprehensive poverty mapping.**

9. Building a body of staff and child activists who value principles of equity, non-discrimination, non-violent conflict resolution and democratic leadership in both micro and macro environments.
10. Building adult skills, specially the skills of duty bearers to listen to, and work with children including creating state and non-state mechanisms that enable child participation.

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