

and accept their doubts, their resistance to change and the emotions that hinder their acceptance of children as citizens with rights, and seek to alter educational practice in order to render the relationship between adults and children more democratic. It is a process that will not bear fruit overnight.

It is certainly important that children should exercise their duties of citizenship progressively through participation in all those situations that affect them. When children understand that they are part of the problem unless they are part of the solution, that democracy is built upon the participation of everyone, that, through the expression of their opinions, they can generate change in their surroundings, and that they are viewed by adults as individuals and not merely as objects of protection or of assistance, then there will be a culture of rights that will allow children to become protagonists in their efforts to be taken into account and exercise progressively their duties of citizenship.

#### **The challenges of a meaningful children's participation**

In the programmes that we are currently implementing, we consider it essential that the family be involved. We have learned that, when small children, through participation in community programmes, become more dynamic, more demanding individuals, who ask questions because adults listen; and who express their opinions because adults allow them to, then problems may arise when the children return to their homes, and their families do not know how to respond to their demands or deal with their opinions. It is thus important to sensitise adults so that they are prepared for a new relationship with their children and so the potential conflicts can be minimised. It is necessary to understand that there is a tension between the legitimate right of children to participate and the obligation, equally legitimate, of adults to protect children. Not all that children demand or desire is appropriate. Adults must protect children, while guiding them and helping them to deal with frustrations and other strong emotions.

Children should not be idealised as angelic beings, uncontaminated by all the shortcomings and errors that affect adults. Indeed, we know very well that

even very small children carry out activities more fitting for adults. They work on the streets, in the fields and ports, handling tools such as knives and axes. Like adults, they may adopt manipulative and violent behaviour in order to survive.

#### **Early years and participation**

We cannot expect the same level of participation from a child of 2, 4, or 8 years of age. Moreover, we must seek to understand the cultural environment of the child, its physical surroundings, its particular capacities and abilities so that we do not require the child to act beyond its stage of development. This means that there must be an effort at sensitisation among teachers, family members and community and programme agents and other individuals active among children.

#### **Quality in young children's participation**

For CECODAP, the surest indicators of the 'quality' of children's participation are revealed through the attitudes that the children adopt when they are participating in the resolution of conflicts, in living side by side and interacting with other children and with adults, in decision-making, in the freedom they feel to express their opinions, and in the spontaneity they show when they declare their points of view. If children seem oppressed, fearful, tense and anxious when they are participating, then we can consider this a reflection of a certain negative background against which they are exercising their duties and rights of citizenship.

# Criteria for the evaluation of children's participation in programming

*The criteria described below are intended to help create and establish tools to measure the effectiveness, benefits and outcomes of various aspects of young children's participation in development programmes, especially programmes oriented towards children. They were developed as part of a contribution to the Bernard van Leer Foundation's 'learning agenda' in response to a need – identified by the Foundation's Latin America desk in 2003 – for a framework to improve understanding of children's participation and use that knowledge to inform programme development. Ideas for the criteria emerged from a meeting between the Foundation and its Latin American counterparts in Chiapas, Mexico, in February 2004, and were subsequently fleshed out in a small workshop in Beberibe (Ceará), Brazil with the input of Foundation staff, counterparts from Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela, and Gerison Lansdown, an external expert in the field. Although elaborated with Latin American counterparts, they were conceptualised to have an international perspective.*

The premise behind 'children's participation' is that children are more than receptacles of learning, passive recipients of adult protection, or human beings not yet fully formed. Children are agents of change in their own lives, the lives of their families and the life of society, entitled to be listened to and taken seriously in decisions and actions that affect them. However, for this right to become a reality, adults need to learn to listen to children and create spaces in which children are enabled to contribute meaningfully as individuals.

While the anecdotal evidence of the benefits of children's participation in programmes is now considerable, there has been, to date, relatively little sustained or independent research into its characteristics and impacts. Children's participation only really began to be widely explored in the early 1990s, and understanding is still in a stage of relative infancy. However, there is now increasing examination of the nature of the minimum standards that might be established to ensure that participation is a significant, affirmative experience for children, and the methods that can be employed in assessing the potential of participation to improve programme outcomes.

There are significant challenges to creating and applying coherent and sensitive indicators and precise measurement tools for young children's participation. For example, it is difficult to construct universally applicable indicators for diverse programmes in different cultures and social and economic contexts. The components of the success or failures of programmes vary widely and can almost always be evaluated only through a mix of quantitative and qualitative tools. Many outcomes of participation can be captured only over the long term, after the effects of the programmes have become more evident as children grow and change. Finally, many staff working with young children lack training and knowledge of the range of innovative tools that have been developed to conduct meaningful dialogue with very young children in order to access their views on their participation in programmes. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. It is important to explore new frameworks for evaluating participation, pilot these frameworks, share them, and adapt and amend them. It is necessarily a learning process.

Certainly, there is a powerful case for developing context-sensitive 'criteria' for the creation of indicators with which to measure the effectiveness

of the various aspects of children's participation in programmes.<sup>1</sup> Such criteria and indicators are needed to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of programmes, clarify those processes and practices that are constructive, redundant or obstructive, and identify areas where additional resources are needed. Furthermore, if children's participation is to be sustained, replicated, resourced and institutionalised into the wider communities in which children live, it is necessary to begin to construct methods of measuring what is being done and how it is impacting on children's lives.

#### Proposed criteria for measuring the effectiveness of children's participation

The following three areas have been proposed for an initial search for appropriate tools and indicators to measure the effectiveness of children's participation. The criteria outlined within these divisions offer potential for accurate monitoring and evaluation of children's participation in programmes, projects, or other initiatives in schools, nurseries, play groups, or other settings:

- **Scope** – what degree of participation has been achieved and at what stages of programme development; in other words, **what is being done?**
- **Quality** – to what extent have participatory processes complied with the agreed standards for effective practice; in other words, **how is it being done?**
- **Impact** – what has been the impact on young people themselves, on families, on the supporting agency, and on the wider realisation of young people's rights within families, local communities and at local and national governmental level; in other words, **why is it being done?**

#### The scope of participation throughout programme development

Children can be involved at different stages in the process of developing a programme – from the initial concept through to implementation and monitoring and evaluation. The earlier they are involved, the greater their degree of influence. At each stage, children can participate at three potential degrees of engagement: consultation, shared decision-making, or self-initiated or self-managed processes.<sup>2</sup> The extent to which children are empowered to influence an initiative will

be influenced by the degree to which they are participating.

The presence or absence of children's involvement in the following tasks can be used as a benchmark to gauge both the mode of engagement and the scope of children's participation in one or more of the following programme stages.

*Stage one: Identification of key issues.* At the design and development stage, it is important to ensure that a programme is going to address the concerns and problems of children. Adults should not assume that they have a monopoly on insights into these concerns and problems. Children can also contribute many insights. The involvement of children in the situation analyses that accompany programme development can therefore be invaluable in securing appropriate and properly targeted programme initiatives and goals. Their participation would require that: (a) opportunities are created so that children can articulate their concerns, priorities and interests [all three modes of engagement]<sup>3</sup>; (b) child-friendly and age-tailored strategies are used in the consultations with children [all three]; and (c) a range of settings are employed to seek out children for the consultations – for example, schools, community groups, recreational facilities, other programme target populations, the media – in order to foster the collection of a diversity of children's viewpoints [all three].

*Stage two: Overall programme planning.* Children can play a significant role in helping to plan what programmes might be developed on their behalf. They can be involved at varying levels: (a) the opinions gathered among children during the identification of key issues are expressly taken into account during programme planning [consultation]; (b) children contribute their views on what programmes are to be developed [shared decision-making]; (c) children are enabled to identify and choose among alternative programme parameters [self-initiated or self-managed processes]; and (d) child-friendly and age-tailored strategies are implemented to build the capacity of children to contribute in programme planning [all three modes of engagement].

*Stage three: Programme design.* Once the general outlines of a programme have been clarified, children can help hone the specifics. Their input in this task can be measured according to the level of

their involvement: (a) they are consulted on ideas conceived by adults [consultation]; (b) defining the basic principles behind the programme, determining the appropriateness of potential components and selecting programme agents and other personnel [shared decision-making]; and (c) space is created to enable them to evolve their own ideas about the details of programme design [self-initiated or self-managed processes].

*Stage four: Programme implementation.* Children can play a key role in the implementation of a programme. For example, they might play a part as researchers to discover more about the opinions of children and about precise aspects of children's lives, run a school council or contribute ongoing ideas and feedback for developing a children's facility. Their involvement can be measured by assessing whether: (a) they are consulted on how they would like to participate in the programme [consultation]; (b) they participate in deciding how programme activities are carried out [shared decision-making]; and (c) they take responsibility for the management of some aspect of the programme, for example, a school class council or a community initiative aimed at a segment of the child population [self-initiated or self-managed processes].

*Stage five: Programme monitoring and evaluation.* Children can play a valuable role in assessing the positives and negatives of a programme. Having programmes evaluated by adults alone will be less effective in understanding their impact on children. Moreover, involvement in monitoring and evaluation provides children with a greater sense of ownership in the programme and interest in its outcomes. Children's involvement in this task can be measured by assessing whether: (a) children's views are elicited during programme evaluations [consultation]; (b) children assist in choosing the programme elements to be evaluated [shared decision-making]; (c) children identify the programme elements to be evaluated and also determine the evaluation methods to be employed by, for instance, designing and carrying out feedback interviews among staff or other stakeholders [self-initiated or self-managed processes]; (d) monitoring criteria are defined in agreement with children at the outset of the programme [all three modes of engagement]; (e) children join in ongoing monitoring and evaluation throughout the programme [all]; and (f) the results of monitoring and evaluation are

discussed with children in appropriate and useful ways [all].

#### The quality of children's participation

There is a growing consensus on standards that need to be applied to ensure the quality of children's participation in programmes.<sup>4</sup> The use of these standards as a tool of evaluation can facilitate assessments of the effectiveness of children's participation in initiatives, especially in terms of the benefits for the children.

*First standard: The programme has an ethical approach.* There are differences in power and status between adults and children. It is necessary therefore to have a clear ethical approach in order to prevent adult manipulation or control, and to create meaningful participation. This can be achieved by ensuring that: (a) staff are committed to, and have a shared understanding of, children's participation; (b) the process is transparent and honest, with children clear about what they are being asked to participate in and the boundaries of what they are able to influence; (c) there are shared principles about how people behave towards each other; (d) any barriers the children might face in their participation – for example, potential parental opposition to the involvement of their children in certain initiatives – are carefully analysed and confronted beforehand; (e) children are provided with adequate information so that they can understand the purposes and characteristics of a programme, as well as the areas in which they may have an input, and (e) staff create space for children to develop their own ideas and activities.

*Second standard: Participation is inclusive.* Children are not a homogeneous group. The opportunity to participate should be available to children irrespective of age, ability, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or social or economic status. Opportunities to participate should challenge rather than reinforce existing patterns of social exclusion and discrimination. To reach these goals, a programme should guarantee that: (a) children in all groups in society are permitted to participate, including, for example, girls, disabled children, minority children and poor children; (b) efforts are made to ensure the equal participation of all children, consistent with their evolving capacities; (c) all children are equally treated and respected within the programme; (d) the programme responds

to the range of the needs of all children, and (e) the programme is sensitive to the cultural background of all children within a framework of universal rights.

*Third standard: The programme provides a child-sensitive, child-enabling environment.* The programme environment in which children participate should be safe, appropriate, welcoming and supportive. This means that: (a) programme spaces encourage children to feel comfortable and relaxed; (b) staff are aware of and receptive to strategies to promote children's participation; (c) children are provided with information appropriate to their age and level of understanding; (d) the programme implements methods of participation that take account of the evolving capacities of children to express themselves and to act; (e) adequate time is allowed for children to 'grow into' effective participation; (f) children are encouraged to discover new forms of participation; and (g) recognition is given to the need for participation to be fun and enjoyable.

*Fourth standard: Children are provided with a safe environment.* Adults working with children have a responsibility to ensure that the children are safe and not exposed to harm, abuse or exploitation. They should therefore ensure that: (a) all programme staff recognise the right of the children to be protected from any form of violence and abuse; (b) staff are sufficiently trained in child protection procedures; (c) participation is planned and organised with a view to safeguarding the children; (d) any added risk to children more likely to encounter difficulties in finding for themselves, such as younger children or disabled or handicapped children, is accounted for; (e) children are aware of their right to be protected from violence and abuse; (f) children know how to seek and ask for help; (g) children are adequately protected from publicity and other exposure if they report wrongdoing; and (h) no photographs, videos, or digital images of children are taken or used without the children's consent.

*Fifth standard: Participation in the programme is voluntary.* The right of children to choose freely whether to participate should be recognised. This can be accomplished by ensuring that: (a) children understand that they may withdraw from participation if they wish; (b) children are supplied with the information necessary to make an informed decision about participation; (c) children are allowed and enabled to become involved

in issues that affect them directly and that can benefit from their special knowledge; and (d) the programme is sufficiently flexible to provide space and time so that children may meet other demands on their time, for example, the wishes of their parents, their school work and duties in the home.

*Sixth standard: Programme staff are well trained, committed and sensitive.* Adults should be trained in the skills necessary to work effectively and confidently with children. A programme should thus make certain that: (a) staff have acquired an appropriate understanding of children's rights, including the child's right to participate; (b) staff are sufficiently aware of participatory monitoring and evaluation techniques; (c) staff are properly supported and supervised; and (d) adequate training is provided to all professionals working with children directly or indirectly through a programme, for example, paediatricians, nurses, or teachers.

*Seventh standard: The programme seeks to create durable linkages with families, professionals and the community.* Children do not live in isolation from their families and communities. Initiatives to promote children's participation should also involve families and other community members in order to encourage harmony between the learning that children acquire through participation and the attitudes children face in the everyday environment beyond the programme. Programme agents should take steps so that: (a) parents are aware of the aims and objectives of the programme; (b) parents are sensitised to the rights and needs of children and know how to support and protect these rights; (c) the programme incorporates and builds on local structures, traditions, skills, knowledge and practice; and (d) members of the community, including local government authorities, religious leaders and other key community actors, are informed about and involved in the programme.

#### *The impact of children's participation*

The participation of children in a programme should also be judged in terms of the impacts it produces. These impacts may be felt in many areas. In order to assess the impacts, it is important to learn the views of the various stakeholders: parents, other community members, staff, other professionals and the children themselves. The nature of the impact under scrutiny and the stakeholder audience involved will influence the indicators that are

constructed to measure the effectiveness of the programme.

*First area of impact: the children.* The impact on children of their participation in a programme may usefully be gauged according to the objectives that were to be accomplished through their involvement. These objectives need to be clear at the outset of the programme. In undertaking an assessment of any impact, it is necessary to find evidence rather than merely an assertion that the impact has been achieved – for example, how has a child's self-esteem been raised and with what effect. Possible objectives for a programme might be to assist the children in demonstrating, experiencing or building: (a) enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, (b) their skills and talents, (c) greater access to opportunities, (d) awareness of their rights, (e) ability to take part in challenging neglect or violations of their rights, and (f) a sense of empowerment.

*Second area of impact: parents and other family members.* The children's parents and other members of their families demonstrate, experience or build: (a) a better understanding of children's capacities, (b) more willingness to consult with and take account of children's views, (c) improvement in the quality of their relationships with children, and (d) greater awareness of and sensitivity towards children's needs and rights.

*Third area of impact: the programme staff.* The staff demonstrate, experience or build: (a) a better understanding of children's capacities, (b) improvement in the quality of their relationships with children, (c) greater awareness of and sensitivity towards children's needs and rights, and (d) practices that reflect greater responsiveness to children's rights and needs.

*Fourth area of impact: the community.* Other community members demonstrate, experience or build: (a) changes in attitudes and better understanding, leading to enhancements in the status of children within the community, (b) greater awareness within the community, including local government, of the rights of children, and (c) more willingness to act in the best interests of children.

*Fifth area of impact: programme initiatives and other institutions.* Professionals, directors and managers demonstrate, experience or build: (a) changes in programmes and initiatives that reflect children's expressed concerns and priorities,

(b) a willingness to adjust programmes and initiatives in order to share more management control with children, (c) the participation of children in numerous other fora as an accepted approach towards childhood development and in order to capture the benefits of children's participation for the community, and (d) a transformation in the organisational culture of local programmes and institutions, as well as donors, that reflects greater respect for the rights of children.

*Sixth area of impact: the rights of children.* All the stakeholders demonstrate, experience or build: (a) a safer, more secure environment for children within their families and communities, (b) more willingness to consult with and take account of children's views on many issues of significance to their lives, (c) greater opportunities for children to participate in decisions within their families, their pre-schools and schools, and in the community, and (d) policies, regulations, laws and resource allocations that help establish better access by children to adequate educational and recreational facilities, promote greater respect for the rights of children and reduce rates of abuse and violence involving children.

#### Notes

- Hart J, Newman J, and Ackermann L (2004) *Children changing their world: Understanding and evaluating children's participation in development*. Plan International (UK): Woking, Surrey, UK
- See Gerison Lansdown's "Participation and young children" in this issue. See also: International Save the Children Alliance (2003) *So you want to consult with children?: A Toolkit of good practice*. International Save the Children Alliance: <[www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/publications.html](http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/publications.html)>
- The three modes of engagement – consultation, shared decision-making and self-initiated or self-managed processes – are indicated by keywords in brackets in the descriptions here and below.
- For more information, see Feinstein C, Karkara R and Laws S (2004) *A workshop report on child participation in the UN study on violence against children*. International Save the Children Alliance <[www.crin.org/docs/resources/publications/participationworkshop.pdf](http://www.crin.org/docs/resources/publications/participationworkshop.pdf)>