

## Mexico

# Pay attention to me!

Documentation and child participation

Kate Waters, Hine Fellow with Melel Xojobal\*

Melel Xojobal, an NGO working with urban indigenous children and families in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, has begun to use documentation as a tool to explore children's participation in generating knowledge.

Child participation is not new to Melel Xojobal. Each of its three intervention programmes with children develops its own mechanisms so that children can participate and make decisions about that particular programme. However, decisions are also made at an institutional level that deal with the coordination of the intervention programmes, with long term strategy, and with institutional policies and values. Melel Xojobal has realised that it must incorporate child participation at this level too, and in doing so is asking itself how documentation can play a role in letting children co-define its values, policies, and strategic vision.

The department in charge of including child participation at a coordination and advisory is the Área de Fortalecimiento Institucional ('Area of Institutional Capacity Building' – AICB). It integrates information from Melel Xojobal's children's programmes in ways that stimulate learning and reflection both inside and outside the organisation. It oversees staff training, systematises and evaluates organisational experience, develops educational materials, and creates thematic knowledge databases. In terms of documentary methods, the AICB has found one way so far to include children's perspectives and opinions in Melel Xojobal's strategic planning.

### Documentation and institutional evaluation

In the first half of 2004, AICB carried out a documentation process that included digitally

recording interviews with children participating in Melel Xojobal's Calles ('streets') project. In Calles, staff members go to public spaces such as squares and markets, to teach reading and writing skills, and to promote cultural reflection among children who work in the streets. The interviews focused on children's experiences with the programme and staff. The questions included: *What have you learned? What do you like best about what we do? What don't you like about what we do together? Are there days when you can't come to Calles? Why? Is it better for us to speak in Spanish, in Tsotsil, or in both languages? How do the other children behave during activities? Has anything bad ever happened while we were working together? What can we change about the programme to make it better?*

The children's responses are thought-provoking insights into how Melel Xojobal's educational strategies are functioning 'on the ground.' For example, responses to questions about how parents see the Calles programme revealed that they are overwhelmingly supportive of their children's attendance, yet at the same time, they depend on their children for economic support. One boy explained, *"When my mother sees you, she tells me to go with you ... she says, 'I want you to read!'"* Yet, when asked if he could come every day, he replied, *"There are days I don't come. I sell ice cream. I want to come, but mom won't let me – 'Go sell your ice cream' [she says]. If I don't sell a lot she scolds me."*

Children also shared the difficulties they encountered in the programme. One resonant theme was physical aggression among children: *"There's a boy who hits a lot,"* Elias, 8 years old, said. When asked what he thinks when this happens, he replied, *"I don't want to be here!"* While the consistent efforts by Calles staff



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have led to a big reduction in hitting, the children's commentaries suggest that the team may have to revisit this issue. In the meantime, the children have their own ideas about how staff members should handle problems that arise.

Asking the children for suggestions and opinions on how to handle issues, or how things 'should be', was a central interview component. One of the themes the children were most adamant about was that staff members continue to speak both Spanish, the national language, and Tsotsil, their own indigenous language. Julio, aged 8, explained that he didn't understand much Spanish, but he did understand everything in Tsotsil. Nonetheless, when asked what should be spoken in the programme, he replied with certainty: *"I'd like you to teach us both! Spanish because I don't speak it much but I want to be able to understand it, and Tsotsil because it is my mother tongue."* Language is an important issue in all of

Melel Xojobal's projects, and the children remind Melel Xojobal that whatever theoretical debates about bilingualism it enters into on an institutional level, it must take their reality into account, in which Spanish is an economic necessity and Calles an important resource for language practice.

The documentary audio format was a large part of the children's participatory experience. But it was also a key learning experience for staff. Hearing the children's responses – the pauses, the rise and fall in voices, the tones and emotions – made for a more immediate, provocative, and revealing experience than the same material presented on paper. The challenge for the AICB now is to carry the power of this documentation into the formal institutional space. Currently, the interviews are being edited into short sound pieces, grouping together children's responses to each question, for a CD. The CD will be accompanied by a reflection guide that includes

observations and questions about the issues evoked by the children. One example raised by the children is the issue of parental pressure. This raises questions such as what strategies Melel Xojobal's programmes can implement with families so that an agreement is reached that allows children to balance responsibilities with time to attend Calles. Is Melel Xojobal disseminating information about its programmes to communities in a way that encourages participation from families? The CD and reflection guide will be distributed both to the Calles team and to Melel Xojobal's central coordinating committee as tools for analysing the advances and challenges in its programming.

### *Children have their own ideas about how staff members should handle problems that arise.*

#### **Documentation in institutional philosophy and public policy**

Melel Xojobal's second initiative in documentation and child participation is aimed at promoting children's rights in like-minded organizations. One of its institutional objectives is to develop a policy on the issue of children's rights in relation to child work. All the children work part-time or full-time to contribute to the family income. Given the social and cultural context, Melel Xojobal feels that it can contribute an important anti-abolitionist voice to the child work debate.

The model for the process of policy definition is twofold: first, staff and volunteers conduct research and documentation projects on previously defined aspects of children's rights; second, Melel Xojobal participates in a 'research-seminar' process in which this material is reviewed and analysed. After the third seminar, Melel Xojobal will begin drafting and revising the policy paper.

In planning this policy definition process, AICB has faced the question: 'Who creates knowledge?' As the organisation moves through a learning and analysis process, who are the 'expert' voices to whom Melel Xojobal turns for perspective and guidance? It has

realised that the voices of authority are not just other organisations, fieldworkers, academics or authors. Children also have the voice of authority and the right to be heard in the halls of power, and it is Melel Xojobal's responsibility to carry them there.

#### **Conclusions**

Both of these initiatives are in early stages, and Melel Xojobal cannot yet offer final results and analysis. However, they already offer encouraging results and challenging questions about child participation in all levels of organisational life, and are causing Melel Xojobal to review some of its practices. Will Melel Xojobal establish permanent child councils to advise on various issues? Will it establish documentary projects that will share the perspectives of a wider segment of the population? How can children both inform other decision-makers and be included in decision-making?

For the time being, Melel Xojobal continues to depend on staff for key decisions, and it is likely that adults will always hold leverage in institutions. But documentary methods, because of their intellectual and emotional power, are techniques that can help them become better informed and more empathetic decision-makers. Children are prepared and willing to express their knowledge and opinions on their lives and on organisational life. What do their words and images have to teach us, and how will we make those words accessible to our institutions? They are talking. Are we listening?

\* The Bernard van Leer Foundation currently supports the Lewis Hine Documentary Initiative, aimed at developing documentary projects on issues that are central to children and families. For more information please visit <[www.cds.aas.duke.edu/hine](http://www.cds.aas.duke.edu/hine)>.

## Zimbabwe On the way to child participation

**Doreen Munyati-Nyamukapa, Director of the African Network for the Prevention of and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) and Dumisani Mnyandu, Project Officer ANPPCAN**

Child participation, in the sense of enabling children to make their views known and having them taken into account during discussions and decision-making processes, is a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe – it first made an appearance together with globalisation. Cultural norms and values used to determine how children were perceived and, until recently, it was unheard of to talk of child participation in Zimbabwe: the child was there to be told, to listen or to be punished. Even today, children in rural areas have fewer opportunities for participation than do the urban children, mostly because rural settings remain more traditional than do urban settings.

But child participation is slowly gaining momentum. Our country's constitution allows certain rights such as freedom of expression, although for children – and especially young children – this is subject to parental guidance. In practice, child participation means involving children in activities that directly or indirectly affect them. They may be present for discussions and may air their views, perhaps in creative ways that allow them to express themselves, perhaps with some support from adults.

#### **Examples**

The most obvious example of child participation in Zimbabwe is our Child Parliament, which has child representatives from each constituency. It meets regularly to discuss children's issues and make recommendations that are passed on to legislators for consideration. Participation is voluntary, and the parents or caregivers have to give their consent. There is some criticism of the Child Parliament. For example, that it is not fully representative of

all children since it is composed mostly of urban and elite children. It is also unclear whether children under the age of five are represented at all. Moreover, some people argue that the Child Parliament is politicised and that children are told what to say. On the positive side, however, there is potential for children to effectively lobby for child-friendly budgets, quality education and improvements in health services. Additionally, it can be a good basis for a national and community peace-building process, as a culture of participation and dialogue is instilled at a young age. And it is also worth noting that the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation reinforces the benefits of the Child Parliament with a number of television programmes through which children can communicate their views and feelings.

However, most child participation takes place in two settings that share a belief in creative activities and processes as the most effective tools for ensuring that children under 9 years can participate in developmental work.

The first setting is the early childhood development centre/infant school. Currently, the African Network for the Prevention of and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) in Zimbabwe is working on simplifying the African Charter on the Welfare of Children. To do this, we are involving children by having them send drawings, paintings and poems about what would benefit them. These are then linked to relevant articles of the Charter.

The second setting is the art-oriented organisations such as Inkululeko Yabatsha School of Arts