

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>.

Zimbabwe On the way to child participation

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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



Photo: Courtesy ANPPCAN

Implementing child participation requires sensitive adult guidance

(IYASA), the Children's Performing Arts Workshop (CHIPAWO <www.chipawo.co.zw>) and the Amakhosi Theatre for Community Action. These organisations work with children of up to 18 years of age, are internationally recognised and, besides moulding their creative talents, also give children an opportunity to write poems and short stories, to put on plays and to use music and dance as avenues of expression.

Building child participation systematically

To move on from these achievements, we need a systematic approach to developing or implementing child participation that involves all stakeholders. We also need to follow principles such as:

- 1 projects should not discriminate on the basis of age, gender, abilities, race or ethnicity;
- 2 projects should address child-related issues that

have been established through consultation with children and other stakeholders;

- 3 children should not be forced to participate in activities, they should do so voluntarily;
- 4 there should be sensitive adult guidance;
- 5 there should be recognised limits and clearly defined boundaries to child participation;
- 6 organisations should have clearly defined objective(s) and effective ways of ensuring child participation;
- 7 organisations and personnel must be patient and flexible;
- 8 skills training camps or gatherings that encourage participation may need professionals such as medical personnel and social scientists who know how to manage children's behaviours.

We also need to confront a number of challenges to child participation, as this new phenomenon

is facing some resistance from communities. The following are some of the challenges.

We need a systematic approach to developing or implementing child participation that involves all stakeholders

Culture (the greatest challenge). In most cultures, power in a family is distributed according to age. Thus, young children are at the bottom of the hierarchy of power and there is no way they will be given a chance to be heard. Countering this calls for strong lobbying and advocacy for child participation. One especially important area to tackle is the problem of girls being marginalised and restricted to activities within the family, while boys have the freedom to operate outside of the family at a young age. However, this is being challenged by improvements in education and by globalisation.

Lack of qualified support. There is a shortage of professionals who can work successfully with children, especially in the rural areas.

Inappropriate language. Adult language may not be appropriate for young children: discussion needs to be in terms that make sense to children if child representation in discussions with adults is to be successful.

Adult control. In Zimbabwean legislation, parents or caregivers are authorised to represent children. This puts a filter on the voices of children speaking for themselves and can reduce the extent to which children can participate in certain activities. Equally, children cannot engage in activities without some guidance from adults, and this may distort what children want to express.

Dubious motives. Child participation can be used to gain political mileage. This normally results in parents or caregivers refusing to allow children to participate.

The consequences of child participation, according to ANPPCAN

Positive

Children who experience participation at an early age will grow up appreciating certain freedoms and other human rights that are fundamental to human development.

Their self-confidence will increase as they develop their ability to speak publicly and articulate their opinions and concerns clearly.

They will develop their own social safety nets to cushion hardships and reduce stress and embarrassment.

They will gain increased knowledge and awareness about a broad range of issues and challenges that communities face. Thus they will acquire specific skills and abilities, such as interpersonal and communication skills, which are important for their cognitive and social development, and for their future roles in society.

Negative

Too much participation compromises time to play and energy for other activities.

An adult perspective: if they become too empowered, they may become very difficult to control with a tendency to claim to know everything.