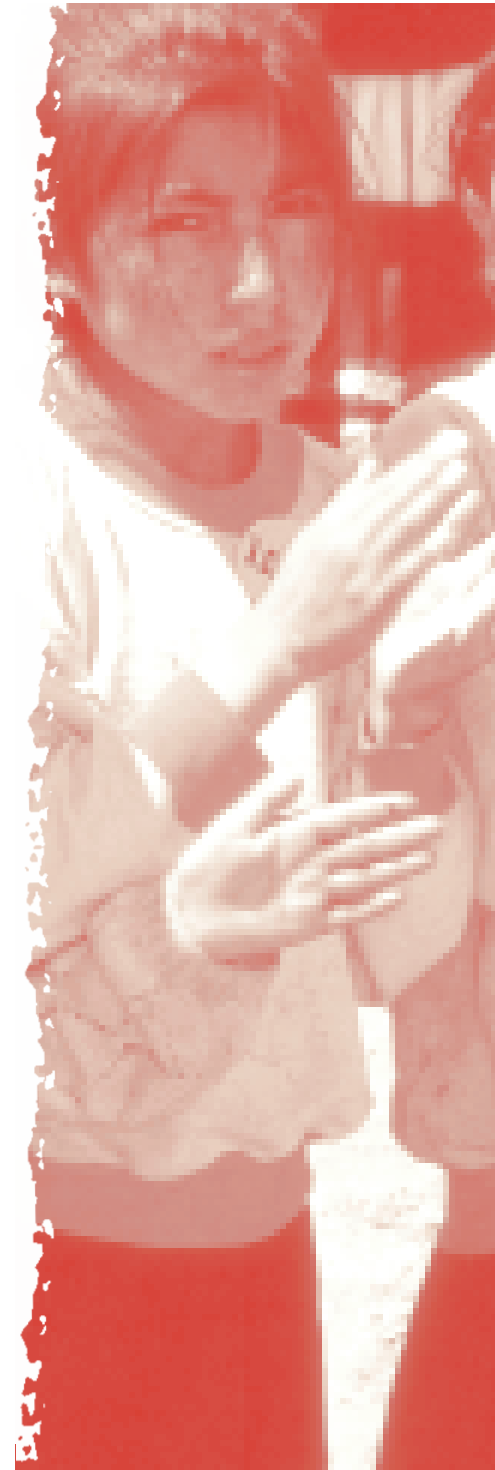


Peru:

Children's Parliaments - hearing children

Grimaldo Ríos Barrientos

Peru: activities with children that are high energy and packed full of activities
photo: Gerry Salole





The author is Coordinator of the Foundation-supported Proyecto Resiliencia de los Niños Afectados por Violencia – Pukllay Wasi (Resilience Project for Andean Children Affected by Violence – Play Houses) that is operated by PAR – CEPRODEP, Ayacucho, Peru. PAR stands for Programa de Apoyo al Repoblamiento (Programme of Support for Repopulation) of the Ministerio de Promoción de la Mujer y del Desarrollo Humano (Ministry for the Advancement of Women and of Human Development); and CEPRODEP stands for the Centro de Promoción y Desarrollo Poblacional (Centre for the Advancement and Development of the Population).

The project works to develop children's resilience – by which is meant their capacity to confront and resolve adversities in their lives. It operates with almost 500 children between four and twelve years, in remote peasant communities in which poverty and war have created massive stress.

This article discusses the Children's Parliaments that the project has developed so that children's voices can be heard and can have an impact on adults who have control over, or influence on, children's lives.

Overall, the project is about enhancing resilience in children and Children's Parliaments are key instruments for us. This is because our resilience work focuses on a cluster of human abilities or characteristics. These are: the ability to express feelings; independence; self-awareness/self-criticism; optimism and a sense of humour; and a willingness to cooperate with others. Children's Parliaments can strengthen each of these; and they are especially useful in ensuring that children understand and subscribe to the notion of cooperation.

Why listen to children?

There are two adult views about child development and about the place of childhood in society. One view says that it is adults who must devise the social policies and family actions that will preserve children's best interests. The second view is that only adults can or should make resources available to support children. Both claim that children are the future but their views actually militate against this. A general vision emerges from these two views: an adult domination that is justified by claiming that children are too young to have valid opinions and ideas. To some extent, this accounts for breakdowns in communication and understanding between generations – 'Who can understand children?' And it can also account for the breakdown of programmes for children.

We take a different approach: we help children to think and speak for themselves; we listen to them; and we respond to what they express. Through this approach, children can make their needs, wishes and hopes known to the people who make the decisions. We call this 'child

protagonism'. It means that the adults who are responsible for a project no longer decide for children, and then make them adapt to it – something that may seem faster and more convenient but that isn't ethical and, in the end, isn't useful either.

This is why we have launched the idea of Children's Parliaments (see box on page 34) and are working to improve it. At first we were interested in ensuring that the programmes that we were devising for children were appropriate for them. We had already been running the resilience project for some time, so we started by trying to find out what they thought about all aspects of what they had experienced so far. We also asked them what they thought should be included in a new programme.

In the first Children's Parliaments, we couldn't generate proper participation by the children about the core interest of the project: how to promote resilience. We realised that this was because we were continuing to operate as specialists – as the adults who know best – and that this did not allow the children to develop and express informed opinions. We therefore took a very different line in subsequent Children's Parliaments, involving children in self-diagnostic processes that enabled them to explore, reflect on and offer their views on the situations they experience. They concentrated on three areas: things that made them sad – their hurts and problems; things that made them happy – their joys; and the things that they wanted in the future – their hopes.

What we learned

First, it is very obvious that, given the right processes, children are very capable of understanding and working with the self-diagnostic approach. They used it on their material situations, on chaos or uncertainty in their lives, on their prospects and, in one community, on abuse.

In terms of our original objectives, the Children's Parliaments taught us the aspirations that children had for the project. They wanted a happy project; they wanted to learn how to make music so they could dance; and they wanted a recreational space. They also wanted better facilities, more like those enjoyed by children in Lima, the capital city of Peru.

The biggest shock for us was that they wanted to change some of the animators. The children found them too hard and very serious: they didn't make the children happy. Also, they didn't always fulfil their promises, sometimes came late, and sometimes didn't come at all. Some would only play with their own children or with the children nearest to them. The children also told us that they weren't happy with our organising team so we had to change that too.

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Enabling young children to participate

At first, we operated with a group of children aged from 4 to 12 years. We didn't think about this beforehand and had expected to work with children of all ages, all together. The outcome was obvious: the older children participated much more, while the smaller children observed or participated in a passive way: they weren't key players.

Our first response to this problem was based on asking the young children questions about what made them sad or happy, writing down what they said and then producing drawings to show them what they had told us.

Unfortunately this did not work well so we have developed a new technique: we produce drawings or photographs about, for example, things related to their daily life – the older children help us in this too. The small children look at these, respond to them, and describe what it is in these images that hurts them, makes them happy, gives them hope. We write down what they tell us and fix this to the drawings and photographs. These become the working notes that are then used as we help them to understand how they can express what they want to say.

Other devices that also help young children to express themselves include play-acting (either directly or using puppets and stories), drawings, jokes, songs and riddles.



Peru: children of different ages participate together – but there are special activities for the younger ones
photo: Gerry Salole



Peru: reading out her point, before placing it in Happy, Sad or Hopes, and then ...
photo: Gerry Salole

Children's Parliaments the Andean way

The Children's Parliaments have been started in two remote rural locations. They are held twice a month in Play Houses – places where children gather to participate in the general work of the project.

An animator runs each of them with a group of about 15 to 20 children. Her job is to create an intimate atmosphere that is also purposeful. Music is sometimes used to help do this. Children sit in two rows facing each other with the animator at one end of the room with a board behind her.

One technique that she uses is to ask children to write on a piece of paper what makes them happy, what makes them sad and what their hopes are. When they have done this, she invites them to come to her end of the room and read out what they have written on their papers. The board behind her is divided into three columns: 'Happy', 'Sad' and 'Hopes'. Each column is also divided horizontally: 'Very', 'Quite' and 'Little'. When a child has read out what is on their paper, he or she tells the animator exactly where it should be placed on the board – for example, under the 'Sad' column, in the 'Very' section.

When the papers have all been added to the appropriate place on the board, a vote is held to see which topics should be discussed for possible action.

We also learned that the children wanted to participate in decision making about the project's activities, about the workshops on art and cultural identity, and about the equipping of the Play Houses.

All of this shows what changes might be necessary when the wishes of children guide programmes. I would go further and claim that, beyond this purely practical level, it is only when children help to shape a project that its viability can be guaranteed.

Children taking responsibility

Even more interesting and important is children's dedication to participating in the realisation of their hopes. Through the processes I've talked about, the children assumed a level of responsibility for the evolution of the project. They said:

This is what we believe, this is what we need and want, and this is what we can and will contribute to make it successful.

In other words, they didn't just make demands. They didn't exhibit a culture of dependence such as you might expect in a country that is in the process of development, especially one that has just experienced terrorism, or policies that have used up so much of the energies of the population. I believe that this also shows that processes of

participation like this have a profound internal effect on children: they accept responsibility for ensuring success in the ideas that they put forward. Now and in the future, this is directly beneficial to their communities.

They also show responsibility elsewhere – for example, for the future of their families:

I am sad because we are very poor, but I'm happy because my cow has just given birth. Now, to help make sure that we don't stay poor, I must take care of the calves. (Alfredo, aged seven)

However, I also want to say that, as we gain more experience, we are refining all of our thinking. We started out with the idea that it was important to enable children to actually speak for themselves, and that we needed to prepare them – train them, even – to do so. The ways in which everything has developed have been almost accidental: whatever arose was considered and, if it seemed to be necessary, became a fundamental part of the project. Now the most important new area to work on is analysing what we are hearing, finding out how to gauge its significance; and determining what kind of strategic analysis is possible. From that we have to determine how to refine the ways in which children can take responsibility for bringing about change.



... making her case for taking action
photo: Gerry Salole

Putting the results to work

We have used the information gathered so far to determine that the project should be happier, and should use participative and child-like approaches. We have also used it to redefine our approaches to working with the issues that children identify: we take a positive line. That means not talking in terms of burdens and effort but in terms of strengthening, of opportunities and of the future. Instead of threats, we talk about fears and about hopes.

The results so far show us that it was realistic to aim at enabling children to decide what they needed, and to argue and work for it. We see that they carry out analyses in four settings: in their families; in their communities; in their schools; and internally as individuals. But we also see that they have yet to move beyond this to become automatic or natural protagonists. That's what we are now working hard on.

The place of the Children's Parliaments in the project

We make the link that children who can speak to their own needs are resilient children. They also become a different sort of citizen. The next step – and it's a big one – could be for them to become child leaders. Children want to speak for themselves, and many of them also want to be leaders in wider society in later life – leaders of their communities, presidents of associations, mayors of towns, and so on.

But again, I have to say that we don't claim to know everything: we are trying out something here, looking for ways forward. The promotion of resilience in children is new to us and nothing existed for us to work with: we are inventing and testing it.

Impact on stakeholders

Parents can see that these kinds of activities change children ... and if children are changed, their families are also changed. Children who can speak for themselves will have different roles in their families, and this changes the ways in which families develop – for example, instead of the parents having a position of authority over the child, they recognise that children are contributing to the development of the family. Such children also generate new resources or put new life into existing ones – like parents for example! We help parents understand the importance of play and what children express through it. Once they understand, parents become resources by joining children, supporting them, responding to them and helping them make things happen. And don't forget that, just by playing, children also make the family environment a happier place.

Teachers said:

This project helps us and it helps the children make better progress.

The children in my class come top in all the regional tests, thanks to this.

A pupil said:

But what would happen if all the other children had this too? Then we wouldn't win everything!

Conclusions

Children's Parliaments can serve as a vehicle of intergenerational communication that can start the processes of healing family divisions. More than this, they help the development of civic consciousness in children and, at an early age, introduce them to abilities such as investigation, analysis, and participation in democratic processes. ○