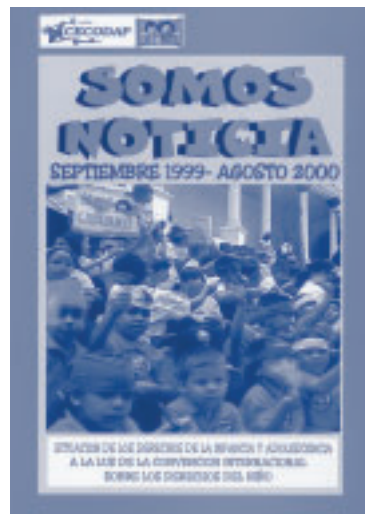


# The participation of children in Venezuela: advances and challenges

Soraya Medina

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Venezuela: *Somos Noticia*  
periodical from CECODAP project



The participation of children in our society continues to be a challenge 11 years since the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its subsequent ratification by the majority of countries in the world. After more than a decade, we still have to ask ourselves how many more years have to pass before children attain their rightful place in society, properly recognised as a group of people who feel, think, act and must be taken into account. Here in Venezuela, even though there have been advances in incorporating the rights of children into law, the culture is still of repression and maltreatment. Marginalisation and exclusion are also obvious in their

everyday lives – within many families, within schools, and within all of those spaces where they are denied opportunities to express their ideas, put together proposals and contribute to determining solutions to the problems that affect them.

## **The participation of children: an ethical perspective**

Venezuela is in the middle of one of the worst crises that our country has suffered in recent years: the increase in poverty; unemployment; the break up of families; the loss of values; and so on. In these circumstances, it may seem

paradoxical to talk about the participation of children. But, in such times, we have to include those who are most affected, otherwise the solutions that we come up with will only address some of the problems. Historically, slaves, women, black people and indigenous peoples have all been involved in the struggle for their rights, so why not children?

Alejandro Cusianovich, citing Crowley, says 'participation is the key right, the right facilitator ... to ensure the fulfilment of all other rights'. He affirms that 'it is not simply a way of reaching an end, nor just a process: it is a basic

## Why promote the participation of children?

- to make public the experiences, views, opinions and ideas of children and young people, in defence of their rights;
- to bring children and adolescents directly into contact with those in authority to ensure that the proposals that they make are valued, supported and properly responded to;
- to develop an environment in which the rights of children and adolescents are respected and guaranteed in their totality by all;
- to offer opportunities for children and adolescents – representing in our case: educational institutions; ethnic groups; children in homes; child workers' centres; disabled young people; ecological, musical and sporting groups; children under eight years of age; and so on – to analyse, discuss together the problems that affect them and, especially, to make sure that their support for a society without violence is heard.

civil and political right for all children and, because of this, is an end in itself'. In conclusion, he says 'Participation has to be respected not only as a goal but as a strategy to reach other goals'. In addition, it must be seen as a universal principle of socialisation and democratisation, as something that human beings need to strengthen their personality, their sense of belonging, and their responsibility for themselves and for others.

But the analyses that we have made in CECODAP show that children remain hidden, and that our society is accustomed to look at their problems through adult eyes. It does not put itself in their shoes and understand that they want to express opinions; and it does not recognise that they feel they have interesting ideas to contribute that count for as much as those of adults. So thousands of children remain

muzzled while adults continue to marginalise and exclude them because they are convinced that they are incapable of participation, believing that they, the adults, know what is right and have the solutions to all the problems. This is neither efficient nor ethical, not is it true to the principles and spirit of the CRC.

### Participation in national debates and decision-making

Obviously participation has to be progressive, in line with the stage of development that children have reached. From there, we in CECODAP believe that the need is to look in depth at the practical realities of children by working with them in their homes, in their schools, in their communities and in the places where decisions about them are taken. With this in mind, CECODAP, in collaboration with government and non-governmental organisations, has

carried through a number of actions that allow children to show that they can participate as social actors. These actions include appropriate training programmes with and through teachers in the schools. Overall, our aim was to develop a new model of participation.

These actions resulted in the development of Children's and Adolescents' Parliaments (later called Regional and National Assemblies of Children and Juveniles); and the participation of children in the media. Participating children come from the popular sector, from schools, from care homes, from their work places, and from special and initial education centres. In the Parliaments/Assemblies, they express their opinions and experiences – for example, about problems that they are facing – and discuss and agree on proposals to bring about improvements. They also make a

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*It occurs to us that the recognition of the child as the subject of rights and also as a social subject, should be given the same historical importance at the beginning of the 21st century as did, at their time and in their way, the movements to overcome slavery, racism and the marginalisation of women. (Jaime Jesus Perez)*

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commitment to promote actions in their centres that will lead to planning with adults about matters that affect them there. A Directorate also maintains contacts with local authorities in order to contribute to policies on childhood. However, it is important to understand that these processes are in the initial stages – at least as far as adults are concerned: some respect the ideas that children and adolescents are bringing forward and incorporate them in their planning; some don't recognise that children can make important contributions; some are still learning to listen.

The first Children's and Adolescents' Parliament was held in 1995 and focused on how Venezuela's political realities measured up to the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The second was held in 1996 and delegates debated reform of the Tutoring of Minors law. Because of the delegates' abilities, processes were

launched that resulted in the law being brought into line with the principles of the CRC. In 1997, the third Parliament had a date with the Congress of the Republic of Venezuela. Here delegates delivered their final observations on the proposed Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents (now passed and in force) that was about to be discussed by the Venezuela Parliament. In 1998, the fourth Parliament reflected on 'The democracy we have and the democracy we want'. This was another demonstration that they saw themselves as subjects with rights and citizens who were making their contribution to society.

1999 saw many transformations in our country. Among these was the creation of a special body to reform Venezuela's National Constitution. The children and adolescents of the country needed to be heard so, from January 1999, they began to create Assemblies of Children and Juveniles to prepare opinions to

express in the national debate. Their objective was to ensure that the rights proposed in the Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents were actually incorporated in Venezuela's new National Constitution. In a national Children's and Juveniles' Constitutional Assembly that was drawn from the existing assemblies, constituents discussed and put together a body of proposals based on the CRC. They then brought this to the body that was drafting a new Constitution for Venezuela. In doing so, they built on the fact that Venezuela is one of the few countries that has changed its legislation in response to what the CRC requires (the Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents mentioned above). The input from the Constitutional Assembly helped to determine the wording in an article in the new National Constitution that is specifically for children and adolescents. The new article says in part:

*Children and adolescents are full citizens as of right and will be protected by legislation, organs of state and specialised tribunals. These will all respect, guarantee and develop the contents of the Constitution, the law, the crc and other international treaties that have been accepted and ratified by the Republic of Venezuela. The State, families and society will assure, with absolute priority, total protection taking into account the overriding*



Venezuela: *Derechos a mi medida*  
CECODAP project  
Photo: Soraya Medida

## Three major challenges to participation

One of the biggest challenges is the vertical nature of educational institutions and the education system generally. These are both based on power games, where adults believe that they hold the truth and the solutions to all situations. The result is one-way education in which students are passive and have few ideas to express their ideas; and where the long-term effect on students is frustration and desertion.

A second major challenge is the culture in which children – especially those under eight – remain objects taught by adults. They are seen as incapable and are therefore given few opportunities to express themselves, and this is especially true in the home where ‘when adults are talking, children have to shut up’.

A third major challenge is to ensure that state institutions continue to open up spaces in which children and adolescents can participate and express their opinions on matters that are of interest to them. The need is to turn law into reality across the whole country – something that is made easier by the kinds of successes that this article has considered.

Venezuela: *Derechos a mi medida*  
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*interest of children. The State will promote the progressive incorporation of children into citizenship and create a national system for the complete protection of children [...] Every person under eighteen is a subject with full rights that ensure their complete protection, paying due regard to their priorities and interests.*

(National Constitution of the Republic of Venezuela, Article 78)

As well as having helped to ensure that they were established in law as

full subjects who enjoy all the many rights of any other citizen, children and adolescents have also opened up public arenas that were reserved for adults just a short time ago.

### The contribution of young children to debates and decision-making

Several children under eight were part of a group of children and adolescents that attended a meeting in the National Assembly to put forward their views and thereby influence the drafting of Article 78. One of these was David who, as the session was drawing to a close, insisted on speaking directly to the President of the body that was drafting the new Constitution:

*Sir, remember that we are here to defend our rights; you must not forget anything that we have told you; you have to keep your promises.*

He, like all the other children who participated in this children’s movement, had enjoyed opportunities to express himself. He could also count on the support of adults close to him who had given him the confidence of knowing that his opinions would be heard and would be taken into account.

In some municipalities in Venezuela, preschool children (between five and eight years) have put together proposals about situations and realities that affect them. One major concern is violence of whatever sort, whether it occurs in their homes, in their schools, or in their communities.

Following discussions in small groups between themselves, they presented their ideas. In general, the authorities were surprised at the capacity of the children to express themselves. Just as important, they

also realised that children were part of the solutions to the problems, rather than part of the problems.

But the authorities also felt that the opinions that the children put forward were simply the ideas of the adults who had worked with them. Of course there is a real danger that children can pick up the ideas of adults and repeat them. We are also very aware that young children can easily be manipulated, and can be made to say things in public that adults could not say. The answer is to keep both intention and process right.

#### Helping young children to participate

In their own ways, and in ways that are appropriate for their stage of development, young children are participating, especially in settings where they don't feel intimidated and where they see that their contributions are respected. The starting point is the places they normally frequent, the

places in which they are becoming citizens with rights. Here, the teachers or leaders lay the foundations by acquiring respect for children and showing it, and by establishing an environment in which values such as solidarity, responsibility and cooperation are basic. At the same time, they provide the space and time necessary. Within that environment, adults can provide opportunities for children to express their opinions – for example, by showing that they agree or disagree with the adults.

From this base, activities can be planned that allow young children to interact with their surrounding realities and to become aware of the situations in which they live. In essence, activities are designed to enable children to reflect and to construct ideas with the maximum possible clarity. To do this, adults take a participative approach, using, for example, games that promote self-expression and creativity.

Two examples show what young children are capable of.

*The President must talk with a man I know who has a lot of money so he can give a house to a child who is living on the street. (girl of five)*

*Why doesn't CECODAP tour the city and collect up all the children who live on the streets and put them in a big house?*

But we, the adults, have to remember that these children are expressing themselves from their own understandings of the world, after – in their own ways – acting, understanding, conceptualising and coming up with proposals to counter problems that they feel. We may find their proposals absurd if we try to place them in the logical/social structure that we have already built to deal with the problem. But instead, we have to let them construct their own world. After all, aren't they telling us of a better world

for children? Aren't they allowing us to see that world? Creativity and self-expression in all its forms – drawings, talking, acting, and so on – come naturally to young children and through them they can express to us what they are feeling and thinking, as long as we can ignore the stereotypical concepts that we often apply to what they tell us. What could happen if we allowed them to act as themselves and express themselves a little more, without imposing our prejudices?

The lesson we have learned is that we need to call a halt in the educational process that calls on teachers to simply teach; and we need to change our attitudes too. We actually like children to think, speak and act in ways that we feel are correct – and when they do not, it leaves us weak, unsettled and disordered. ○