



**INNOCENTI ESSAYS**

No. 4

**CHILDREN'S  
PARTICIPATION**

FROM TOKENISM TO  
CITIZENSHIP

Roger A. Hart



United Nations Children's Fund

“We may be unnecessarily sabotaging our present, and our children’s future, by being blind to the inconsistencies and irrationalities of adult-child interaction in family and community in this century. Mass media programmes about the right to a happy and secure childhood and to a happy and secure retirement cannot substitute for the actual experience of frank and honest confrontation between generations when perceptions, needs and interests differ, in a context of mutual acceptance of responsibility for each other. Neither can special feeding, health and education programmes undertaken for children substitute for joint community projects carried out by adults and children together, in which capacities of the young to contribute to the welfare of all receives full recognition.”

Elise Boulding, *Children’s Rights and the Wheel of Life*,  
New Brunswick, NJ, USA, 1979, p. 89.

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# CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION: FROM TOKENISM TO CITIZENSHIP

by Roger Hart



UNICEF / FRAN ANTMANN

A demonstration by school children in Peru for immunization

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## PREFACE

In 1979 the US section of the International Playground Association (IPA, now renamed the International Association for the Child's Right to Play) recommended that their contribution to the International Year of the Child would be to further the status of young people's participation in environmental projects. Together with Robin Moore and a small team of graduate students and teenagers, I mounted an international survey on the subject and three special issues of the Childhood City Newsletter were published. Regrettably, we received very little information on the many good examples of children's participation from the developing nations. But UNICEF, with its long term commitment to adult community participation has corrected the problem by commissioning this Essay.

As part of its research on street and working children, the Urban Child Programme of the UNICEF International Child Development Centre (ICDC) arranged for me to travel to Kenya, India, the Philippines, and Brazil. I visited both projects with street children and preventive programmes for children at risk of becoming street children. I discovered that, for a number of countries, children's participation is becoming fundamental to their approach to improving children's rights. This is truly an area for the valuable exchange of experiences between nations of 'the North' and 'the South'.

The International Child Development Centre of UNICEF in Florence, Italy has been a superb base for writing about this subject. I am most grateful for the strong support throughout of Cristina Blanc, Senior Programme Officer for the Urban Child Programme, who commissioned this Essay. Also, Jim Himes, the Director of ICDC generously provided creative insights and detailed commentaries. In addition, I received valuable commentary from Savitri Goonesekere, Maalfrid Flekkøy, and Jason Schwartzman. Sandra Fanfani and Kathy Wyper were supremely competent and supportive in a host of practical ways in getting this Essay out: professionals with a valuable sense of humour.

A number of people at the UNICEF headquarters in New York have also been very encouraging. As the UNICEF senior policy advisor responsible for community participation in 1982, Mary Racelis first revealed to me that there might be an audience for my ideas on children's participation. Together with John Donohue, who was then the UNICEF advisor on urban affairs, she helped me a great deal by introducing me to community development issues beyond the USA and Europe. More recently, Marjorie Newman-Black, Historian/Editor and Per Miljeteig-Olssen, Public Affairs Officer offered valuable assistance.

My partners in the Children's Environments Research Group staff were hard working and flexible as always: Selim Iltus with his extraordinary mix of intellectual talent and artistic and graphic layout skills, Ann Kelly for copy editing, and Lisa Price and Elizabeth Wilson for word processing.

I dare not try to recognize all of the wonderful people devoted to disadvantaged children I met overseas. I hope they will be satisfied by seeing in this Essay the influence of their ideas, and of the projects I saw. My guiding hosts in these countries were: Monica Mutuku and Viki Kioko in Kenya; Rita Panicker and Gerry Pinto in India; Pol Moselina, Jimmy Tan, Ana Dionela, Sony Chin, and Emma Porio in the Philippines; and Mario Ferrari, Lidia Galeano, Neusa Lima, and Bill Myers in Brazil. Martinha Arruda, who provided simultaneous translation during three weeks of grueling schedules in eight cities of Brazil, was heroic.

Outside of UNICEF a number of my colleagues generously critiqued the text: Joe Benjamin, youth worker and a pioneer of the adventure playground movement in Britain; Richard Chase, President of the Child Growth and Development Corporation; William Cousins, development consultant and former UNICEF senior policy specialist in urban affairs; Fabio Dallape, expert on East African Programmes for Street and Working Children; William Kornblum, sociologist; David Krittt, developmental psychologist; Geraldine Laybourne, President of Nickelodeon Television; Robert Schrank, expert on the world of work; and Brian Waddel, political scientist.

Most of all, I wish to thank Sherry Bartlett for her heartfelt involvement in the issue, her insightful comments, and her careful editing of the text.

You may be troubled by my alternating use of 'he' and 'she' throughout this Essay. Gender pronouns are a problem. I chose this solution because I wished to stress the importance of the participation of girls, as well as boys, in all projects.

A comprehensive handbook describing different methods that can be used with children and teenagers is currently under production at ICDC with authors from five continents and will be available at the end of 1992. Anyone who is interested in sharing information on methods may write to the author at the address on the back of this publication.

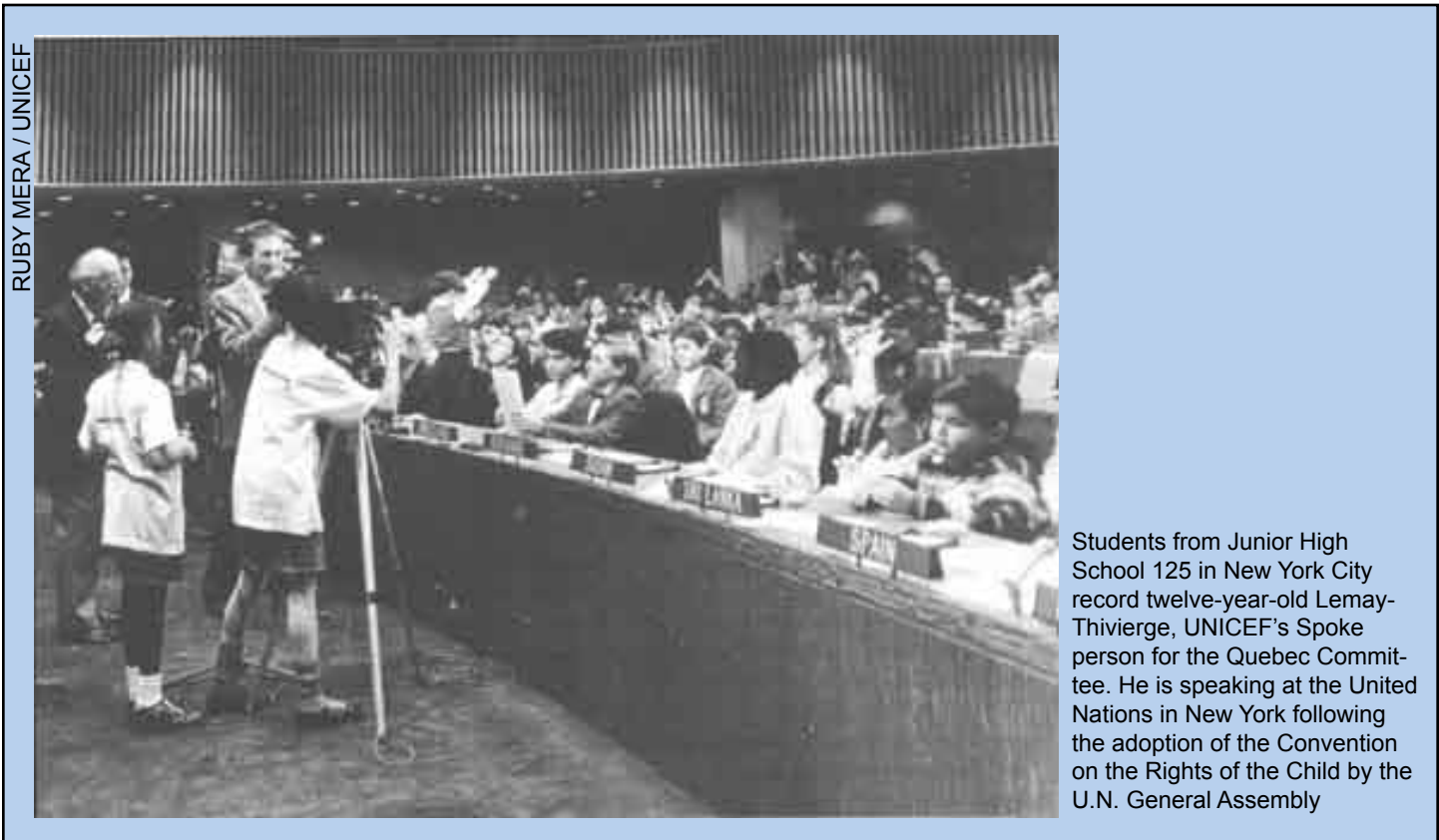
# I. INTRODUCTION

A nation is democratic to the extent that its citizens are involved, particularly at the community level. The confidence and competence to be involved must be gradually acquired through practice. It is for this reason that there should be gradually increasing opportunities for children to participate in any aspiring democracy, and particularly in those nations already convinced that they are democratic. With the growth of children's rights we are beginning to see an increasing recognition of children's abilities to speak for themselves. Regrettably, while children's and youths' participation does occur in different degrees around the world, it is often exploitative or frivolous. This Essay is designed to stimulate a dialogue on this important topic.

It might be argued that 'participation' in society begins from the moment a child enters the world and discovers the extent to which she is able to influence events by cries or movements. This would be a broader definition of participation than can be handled in this Essay, but it is worth bearing in mind that through these early negotiations, even in infancy, children discover the extent to which their own voices influence the course of events in their lives. The degree and nature of their influence varies greatly according to the culture or the particular family. This Essay, however, focuses entirely on children in the public domain: school, community groups, other organizations or informal groups beyond the family. It does not address preschool children or some of the important issues of children's social and economic participation within their families.

The term 'child' needs some qualification, particularly in light of the recent U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, which extends the meaning of 'child' to any person up to eighteen years. In many western countries teenagers lead such protected and constrained lives that it may seem appropriate to label them 'children'. I will follow the more common usage however; here 'child' will refer to the pre-teenage years, and 'youth' or 'teenagers' to the ages thirteen to eighteen. The term 'young people' will be used to embrace both age groups.

This Essay is written for people who know that young people have something to say but who would like to reflect further on the process. It is also written for those people who have it in their power to assist children in having a voice, but who, unwittingly or not, trivialize their involvement.



Students from Junior High School 125 in New York City record twelve-year-old Lemay-Thivierge, UNICEF's Spoke person for the Quebec Committee. He is speaking at the United Nations in New York following the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the U.N. General Assembly



## II. THE MEANING OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

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The term 'participation' is used in this Essay to refer generally to the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship.

The degree to which children should have a voice in anything is a subject of strongly divergent opinion. Some child advocates speak of children as though they were potentially the saviours of society. But many will say that participation by children is a naive notion for children who simply do not have the decision-making power of adults. Others feel that children should be protected from undue involvement and responsibility in the problems of society; that they should be allowed to have a carefree childhood. The erosion of children's free time and free play in the industrialized countries is a matter of too much protection, not too little. Children need to be involved in meaningful projects with adults. It is unrealistic to expect them suddenly to become responsible, participating adult citizens at the age of 16, 18, or 21 without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved. An understanding of democratic participation and the confidence and competence to participate can only be acquired gradually through practice; it cannot be taught as an abstraction. Many western nations think of themselves as having achieved democracy fully, though they teach the principles of democracy in a pedantic way in classrooms which are themselves models of autocracy. This is not acceptable.

There are a multitude of examples of children who organize themselves successfully without adult help. You can probably remember building a play house with friends at seven or eight years of age, unknown to adults, or perhaps selling refreshments from a small stand in front of your home. Such examples from your own memory are the most powerful evidence of young people's competence. The principle behind such involvement is motivation; young people can design and manage complex projects together if they feel some sense of ownership in them. If young people do not at least partially design the goals of the project themselves, they are unlikely to demonstrate the great competence they possess. Involvement fosters motivation, which fosters competence, which in turn fosters motivation for further projects.

William Golding described in *Lord of the Flies* the kind of society boys might create if left to themselves on a desert island. This is a useful reminder to idealists about children that the kind of society we need to look for is one where children learn to become competent, caring citizens through involvement with competent, caring adults. While there may be many valuable examples of children organizing themselves without adults, these are not always for good causes: the street gangs of Santiago in Chile or Medellin in Colombia are just two current examples. We should not underestimate the importance of adult involvement, not only for the guidance they can offer, but also for the lessons they need to learn.

Young people's community participation is a complex issue which varies not only with a child's developing motivations and capacities, but also according to the particular family and cultural context. In cultures where adults themselves have little opportunity to influence community decisions, young people can become the initiating force for change. An interesting example is the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka where, in many villages children are the key to the development of community participation. Early childhood schoolteachers first change how the children participate and subsequently extend this to the adult population.

There are, however, negative examples of the use of young people by particular groups, such as the Youth Movement used by Hitler as a subversive force with adults: children were even encouraged to spy on their own parents. There are also many positive examples of youth radicalism developing as a response to adult inertia, but these usually involve older teenagers and young adults. Most commonly, however, the degree of opportunity for a child to collaborate in the everyday management of family, schools, neighbourhood and community groups is a reflection of the participatory opportunities for adults in that culture. The two are inevitably intertwined and so one must speak of encouraging participation by all, including children. Intervening to improve children's participation is one means of fundamentally improving the whole society, but this should always be done while keeping in mind the child's family and the impact that a child's empowerment may have on his relationships within the family.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 1987

From the earliest ages children try to understand how they can participate meaningfully in society



**Young Firefighters Learn From a Pro**

Dennis Lyman of the Pittsburgh Fire Department giving a lesson in safety to a group of youngsters who had tried to help. After an electrical storm knocked down some wires, the boys, complete with

fire hats and small truck, placed cones around some of them. Fortunately, the ones they chose were harmless telephone wires lying well away from dangerous electrical lines.

**CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION AND THE CONCEPT OF CHILDREN’S RIGHTS**

Young people’s participation cannot be discussed without considering power relations and the struggle for equal rights. It is important that all young people have the opportunity to learn to participate in programmes which directly affect their lives. This is especially so for disadvantaged children for through participation with others such children learn that to struggle against discrimination and repression, and to fight for their equal rights in solidarity with others is itself a fundamental democratic right.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, now ratified by over 100 nations, has significant implications for the improvement of young people’s participation in society. It makes it clear to all that children are independent subjects and hence have rights. Article 12 of the Convention makes a strong, though very general, call for children’s participation:

*States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

It goes on to argue in Article 13 that:

*The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.*



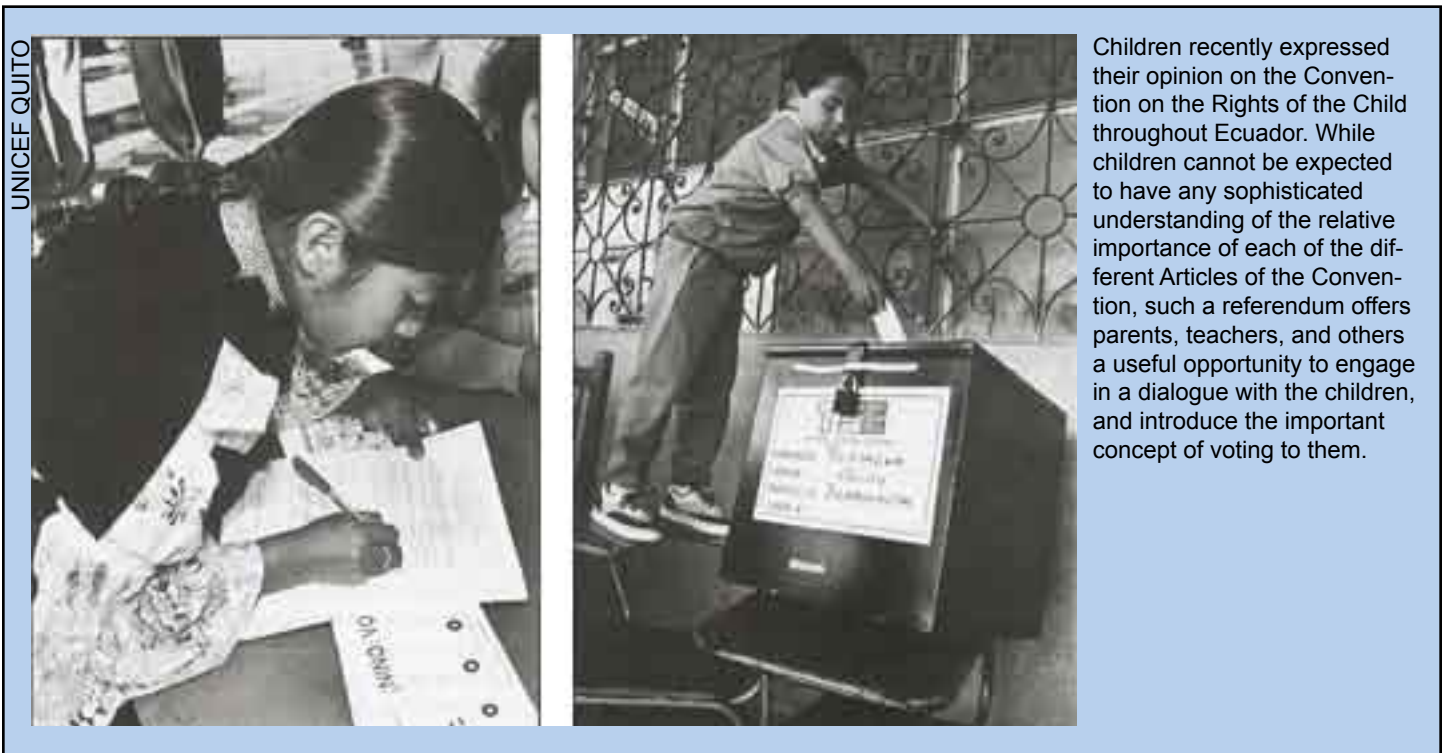
The Convention, being more concerned with protection, does not emphasize the responsibilities which go along with rights. Children need to learn that with the rights of citizenship come responsibilities. In order to learn these responsibilities children need to engage in collaborative activities with other persons including those who are older and more experienced than themselves. It is for this reason that children's participation in community projects is so important. While much of the Convention emphasizes the legal protection of the child and the child's ability to speak for himself in legal matters, Articles 12 and 13 go well beyond this. Unfortunately, they also go well beyond what many families in most cultures would allow of their children even within the family. The family is not, of course, the sole agent in a child's socialization, but it is the primary one and is recognized as such in the preamble to the Convention:

*Convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community.*

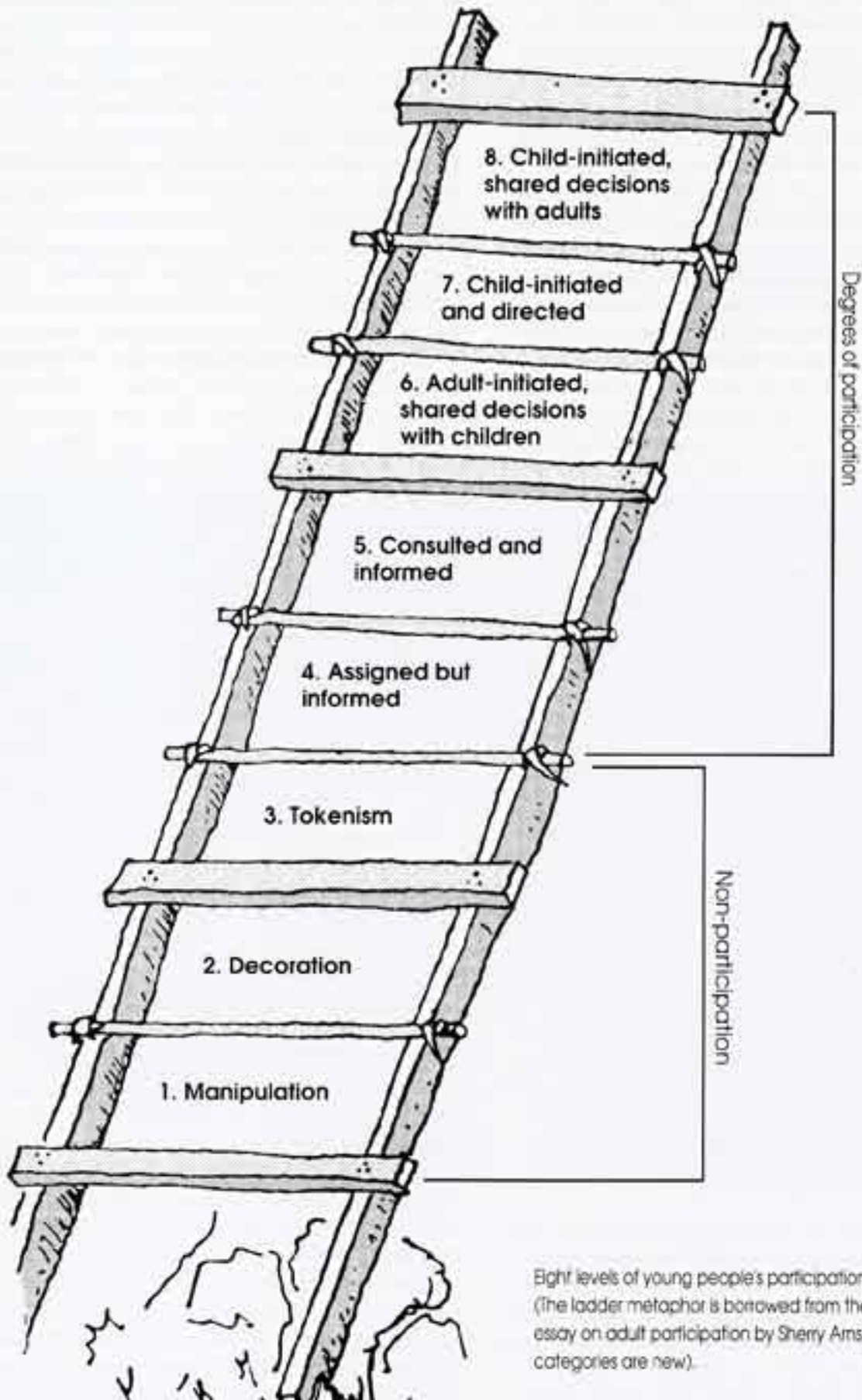
While the child's freedom of expression and participation in community issues may often be contrary to the child-rearing attitudes of the child's parents or caretakers, it is ultimately in the best interests of all children to have a voice. This is sometimes especially difficult for disadvantaged, low income parents to understand when they themselves have had no voice and see authoritarian child rearing as the best approach for their child's success. The aim should be to encourage the participation of the whole family. Sometimes children may themselves be the initiators but the goal should always be at least to make the parents aware of the process.

There is a universal tendency in families not to recognize the capacities of their children as decision makers even when, as workers, they are critical to the economy of the family. This became clear during the search for valid examples of genuine participation for this booklet: some of the best examples of children's self government came from working children living apart from their families on the streets. In these instances, parental dominance has been broken, and street workers have been able to support young people to collaborate more with one another using some of the principles and techniques described in this Essay.

There is growing support for children's rights. For those whom UNICEF calls 'children in especially difficult circumstances' this is leading to some radical departures from past cultural norms. Some street children, for example, have been helped to form their own organizations; and there are increasing numbers of court cases on behalf of abused and neglected children. But the larger solution to improving children's lives must involve families and communities: they must be supported to do what they have traditionally done - to care for their children in a stable manner consistent with their culture. Simultaneously, families need to be encouraged to open up traditional practices to the greater involvement of their children as part of a general move towards creating a more democratic society, with greater opportunities and equal rights for all.



# The Ladder of Participation



Eight levels of young people's participation in projects. (The ladder metaphor is borrowed from the well-known essay on adult participation by Sherry Arnstein (1969); the categories are new).

### III. MANIPULATION AND TOKENISM: MODELS OF NON-PARTICIPATION

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Children are undoubtedly the most photographed and the least listened to members of society. There is a strong tendency on the part of adults to underestimate the competence of children while at the same time using them in events to influence some cause; the effect is patronizing. There are, however, many projects entirely designed and run by adults, with children merely acting out predetermined roles, that are very positive experiences for both adults and children. Children's dance, song, or theatre performances are good examples of this as long as people understand that they are just that: performances. Problems arise when children's involvement is ambiguous or even manipulative.

The Ladder of Participation diagram is designed to serve as a beginning typology for thinking about children's participation in projects. The ladder metaphor is borrowed from an article on adult participation, though new categories have been developed for this Essay (see Arnstein, 1969).

*Manipulation* is the title of the lowest rung of the ladder of participation. Sometimes adults feel that the end justifies the means. One example is that of pre-school children carrying political placards concerning the impact of social policies on children. If children have no understanding of the issues and hence do not understand their actions, then this is manipulation. Such manipulation under the guise of participation is hardly an appropriate way to introduce children into democratic political processes. Sometimes such actions stem from adults' unawareness of children's abilities. It might be more accurate to call them misguided rather than manipulative, but either way there is certainly a need for improved awareness on the part of adults.

Another example of manipulation is a situation where children are consulted but given no feedback at all. The most common method is for children to make drawings of something, such as their ideal playground. Adults collect the drawings and in some hidden manner synthesize the ideas to come up with 'the children's design' for a play ground. The process of analysis is not shared with the children and is usually not even made transparent to other adults. The children have no idea how their ideas were used. A simple improvement on this idea would be to do a content or thematic analysis of the drawings with the children and thereby arrive at some principles for a play ground design, or whatever the subject may be. Such an improvement would move the project up three rungs of the ladder, to become participatory.

In contrast, a straightforward drawing competition, where the judging criteria and process are made clear in advance, cannot be criticized as manipulative. It is perfectly honest about not being participatory. If you read newspaper examples with titles like 'Children Build New Garden for Housing Project', look for any discussion of the process of children's involvement. The chances are you will find none. You will read about the finished product, and you will probably read the names of a lot of adult 'officials' involved in the process; but you will have learned nothing about whether the children were at all involved.

With the growth of the notion that children can have a voice, organizations have begun to conduct opinion polls and referenda with children. These methods have some exciting potential but are susceptible to manipulation even when used with adults. Preadolescent children, with their varying capacities for interpreting the meanings and purposes of such instruments, are a particularly easy prey for this technique.

*Decoration*, the second rung on the ladder, refers, for example, to those frequent occasions when children are given T-shirts related to some cause, and may sing or dance at an event in such dress, but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organizing of the occasion. The young people are there because of the refreshments, or some interesting performance, rather than the cause. The reason this is described as one rung up from 'manipulation' is that adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by children. They simply use the children to bolster their cause in a relatively indirect way.

*Tokenism* is used here to describe those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions. Such contradictions seem to be particularly common in the western world because of progressive ideas about child-rearing which are often recognized, but not truly understood. There are many more instances of tokenism than there are genuine forms of children's participation in projects. Commonly, as far as the adults are concerned, the projects are in the best interests of children, but they are manipulative nevertheless.

Tokenism might be a way to describe how children are sometimes used on conference panels. Articulate, charming children are selected by adults to sit on a panel with little or no substantive preparation on the subject and no consultation with their peers who, it is implied, they represent. If no explanation is given to the audience or to the children of how they were selected, and which children's perspectives they represent, this is usually sufficient indication that a project is not truly an example of participation. This does not mean that young people cannot genuinely and effectively be involved in conference panels. If such events are organized in a participatory manner, and the children are comfortable with that medium of communication, they can be valuable experiences. An excellent example of young people's participation in a conference will subsequently be described on the highest rung of the ladder. Sadly, no matter what the children say, or how unrepresentative of other children their comments might be, one can be sure of a lot of applause and photography, and some cute stories in the newspapers the following day. Because children are not as naive as usually assumed, they learn from such experiences that participation can be a sham.

## SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

The large scale social mobilization of children and youth is a difficult phenomenon to categorize. It is common in many countries to observe young people in large numbers, often in uniform, demonstrating collectively about some issue. It might seem easy to reject these examples as non-participation by arguing that they are not voluntary. It is preferable, however, to look more closely at such examples and at the particular culture where they are found in order to ask to what extent they are participatory or not. It is useful to think of such projects along a continuum. This continuum ranges from regime instigated to voluntary activity. It may be that in many large-scale mobilization projects, though the children may not have initiated the project themselves, they may be well informed about it, feel real ownership of the issue, and even have some critical reflection about the cause. Sending a boy scout troop out to clean up spectators' garbage after a sports event would not be participation. If, however, the scout troop was informed fully about the problem, and its causes in advance of the project, and understood why they were being asked to volunteer, then this could be classified on the first genuine rung of participation on the Ladder of Participation: 'Assigned but informed'. This category will be considered in the following section.

UNICEF / LIBA TAYLOR



It is often difficult to see the 'social mobilization' of children as participation. Freedom of choice is the key of course. Children are often organized entirely by adults and herded out to demonstrate. Such events may have considerable merit for the children nevertheless, particularly when the issue concerns children, is understood by them, and is deemed by them to be important. In such instances, social mobilization may be an effective way to introduce children to the idea of having a voice on issues so that they might subsequently volunteer for genuine participation projects. In this photograph, children in Mexico City demonstrate as a part of a national vaccination day.



## IV. MODELS OF GENUINE PARTICIPATION

The ladder of participation introduced in the previous section is useful for helping one think about the design of children's participation, but it should not be considered as a simple measuring stick of the quality of any programme. There are many factors affecting the extent to which children participate other than the design of a programme. The ability of a child to participate, for example, varies greatly with his development: a preschool child may be only capable of carrying materials to a playground building site, whereas an adolescent might be able to oversee the entire building operation. This question, together with some of the subtle cultural issues affecting children's participation, will be considered in a subsequent section. Also, it is not necessary that children always operate on the highest possible rungs of the ladder. Different children at different times might prefer to perform with varying degrees of involvement or responsibility. The important principle again is one of choice: programmes should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability.

### ASSIGNED BUT INFORMED

I have labelled the fourth rung of the ladder of participation 'Assigned but informed'. There are a number of important requirements for a project to be truly labelled as participatory:

1. The children understand the intentions of the project;
2. They know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why;
3. They have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role;
4. They volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them.

It is useful to take a conference as an example, for this is commonly a setting for 'decorative', 'manipulative', or 'token' involvement of children. The recent World Summit for Children held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York was an extremely large event with great logistical complexity. It would have been difficult to involve young people genuinely in the planning of such an event, but the organizers wanted to go beyond the normal involvement of children and youth as merely cute representatives of their age group. Roles were created which were important both functionally and symbolically. For example, a child was assigned to each of the 71 world leaders. As 'pages', these children became experts on the United Nations building and the event, and were able to play the important role of ushering the Presidents and Prime Ministers to the right places at the right times. Of course, the symbolic power of this was not missed by UNICEF, the press, or by the leaders themselves, and ample opportunities were given for photography. Nevertheless, the children's roles as pages were important and were clear to all. The children were proud to be serving at an event of such importance. Had they been asked to speak in order, somehow, to represent the views of children, this would have removed the example to the bottom rungs of the ladder, for these were the children of diplomats and were selected for convenience rather than to be representative of any particular group. To use them as pages was appropriate; to present them as spokespersons would have been yet another example of tokenism.



Conferences, like this UNICEF youth summit in Wellington, New Zealand, can be positive democratic experiences for children when they are well designed. Usually, however, the children are not elected by any larger group of children to represent them, they do not report back to any other children, and they have not prepared for their role through discussions with other children. Consequently, these are usually token events with a lot of photographs taken by the press but little serious attention given to the substance of the children's comments.





At the recent World Summit for Children each of the 71 heads of State were assisted by 'pages' from their own country. Conferences are commonly settings for tokenism in children's participation but, because at this conference the children were able to help in the important roles of ushering the leaders to the right places at the right times, their role was practical as well as symbolic. It should, therefore, be considered an example of genuine participation

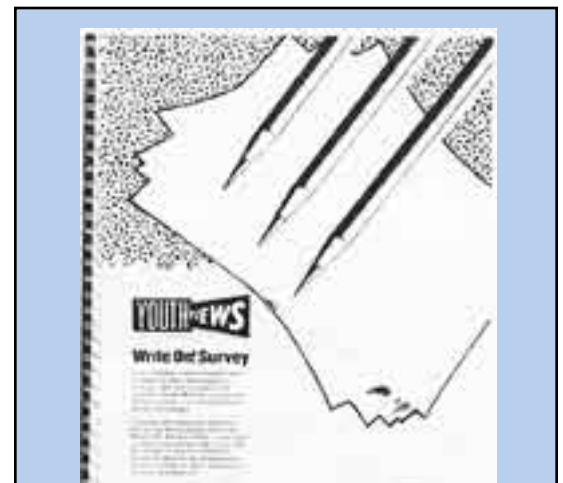
## CONSULTED AND INFORMED

Young people sometimes work as consultants for adults in a manner which has great integrity. The project is designed and run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously. An interesting example is available from the corporate world, a useful reminder that genuine participation experiences are important for all children in all settings. At Nickelodeon, a television company based in New York, new ideas for television programmes are sometimes designed in consultation of children. Low cost versions of the programme are created and critiqued by the children. The programmes are then redesigned and again shown to the same expert panel of children. This is very different from the normal use of children in market research in the corporate world where the children are paid for their time to discuss a product in a group session, but are not informed of the results of the session and in no way become involved in the process.

A survey was recently designed by the city of Toronto, Canada to obtain youth views on the city. Based upon a similar survey by 'Kids Place' in Seattle, Washington in the USA, it is more than most cities do with their children and it is honest about the process. It could probably be called an example of 'consultation' though it does not seem to go far enough in involving youth in the process, except for the lucky winner who becomes 'Mayor for a day'. An improved design would promise to share the findings of the survey with the participating youth. Furthermore, if the surveys were conducted by students in the public schools the children could themselves analyze and report on the data, rather than sending it to a distant city agency.

## ADULT INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH CHILDREN

The sixth rung of the ladder is true participation because, though the projects at this level are initiated by adults, the decision-making is shared with the young people. Many community projects are not meant for use by any particular age group, but are to be shared by all. Invariably, of course, it is the most politically powerful age groups (from 25 years to 60 years in many industrialized nations) which dominate the plan fling process even when it is participatory. Our goal in these instances should be to involve all persons, but to give particular concern to the young, the elderly, and to those who may be excluded because of some special need or disability.



A survey, recently completed by the City of Toronto, Canada, to obtain youth views on the city is an example of consultation. Like most surveys, it could be greatly improved by building youth into the process of analysis and discussion of the results. Consultants should at least be informed of the results.



telex hook-up to agency network



copy editing



journalist

Children's news publishing often involves a high degree of responsibility and can be classified on the sixth rung of the Ladder: Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children. During an exhibition for the International Year of the Child (1979), Group Ludic created a tent in Paris where children learned to use a telex to gather news from other regions of the country. They produced a daily newspaper and they designed low-cost audio visual shows using hand-drawn transparencies. Professional journalists were brought in to offer advice and technical assistance.

### ‘NUESTRO PARQUE’: A PROJECT FOR ALL AGE GROUPS

When the Children's Environments Research Group was approached by the Youth Action Program in New York City to help the Young People's East Harlem Resource Center design a park for multipurpose use, we knew we would have to find a process which would involve all of the community, but would pay special attention to young people, its primary users. Separate workshops were held with groups of children, teenagers, and parents (a number of whom were also teenagers). Three dimension modelling materials were used because we have found this method to be more liberating for people not accustomed to design. It also enabled very young children to be involved. They created features such as card board sandboxes and gardens, and benches of plasticine. As they struggled to locate these features on a scale model, they argued out their priorities and debated the most critical design issues. This enabled questions of access, safety, and security to be aired. All of the design sessions were videotaped, thereby enabling the landscape designers to incorporate all of the features and issues which the community thought were important.

The different model designs were wheeled out on to the sidewalk for a design festival. Large numbers of residents were attracted by music and food, and invited to critique and modify the designs. It is critical to this process that even those local residents who were not involved in the design understood that this was an open process to which they were invited. The landscape designers produced alternative syntheses of the different groups' ideas. These were then critiqued by the community before being hardened into a final design. Experience has shown us that spaces created by this kind of highly participatory community design process suffer much less vandalism than those carried out by designers behind closed doors.



Children of the Young Peoples East Harlem Resource Center in New York putting finishing touches to one of the models for their proposed park. The "Nuestro Parque" models were displayed on the sidewalk outside the park for all local residents to comment on and to build alternative designs if they wished.

## CHILD INITIATED AND DIRECTED

We can all think of dozens of examples where children in their play conceive of and carry out complex projects. When the conditions are supportive for them, even very young children can work cooperatively in large groups. The photograph below illustrates part of a large dam system which children under eight years of age, as many as fifty at a time, built on a sandbank behind a school in Vermont in the USA over many months. Here the supportive conditions were an enlightened school staff who understood the value of such play activity so well that they did not interfere or direct. They also had such strength in their conviction as educators that they were willing to suggest to parents complaining about soiled clothes that they send their children to school with different clothing! It is more difficult, however, to find examples of child initiated community projects. A primary reason for this is that adults are usually not good at responding to young peoples own initiatives. Even in those instances where adults leave children alone to design and paint a wall mural or their own recreation room, seems hard for them not to play a directing role.

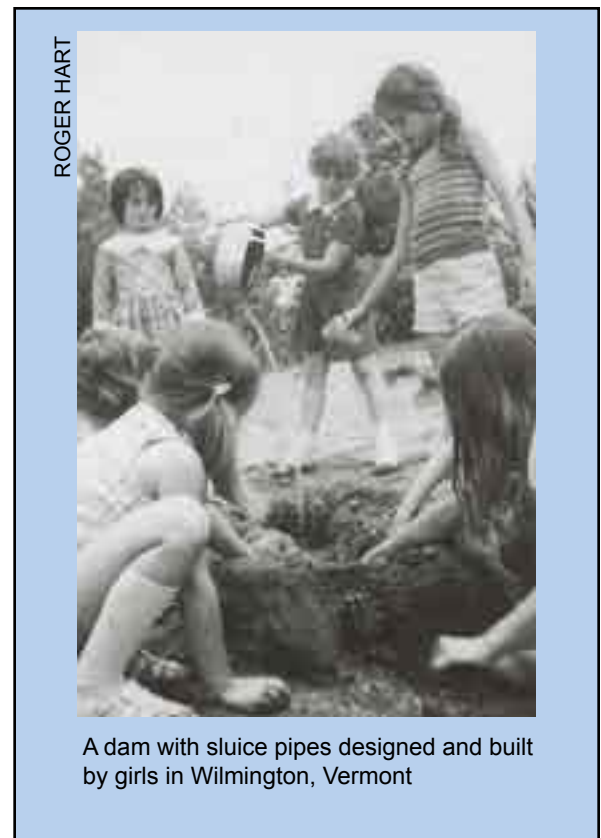
## CHILD INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH ADULTS

One of my best examples of this category of participation comes from a public school in the USA. Two ten year old boys had enviously observed me taking small groups of children from another class into the woods to observe animal behaviour from behind a specially built blind or hideout. They built a blind beneath a table in their classroom and began to observe other children's behaviour, using one of the forms I had designed for studying animal behaviour. Their teacher observed this and supported the children by suggesting ways they might improve their blind and the design of the form. The activity became a valuable means for the class of children to learn about themselves by observing their own behaviour, and it was extremely useful at the end of the school day in aiding conflict resolution and suggesting new strategies for classroom organization and management. This example obviously relied heavily upon the impressive insight and creativity of a caring schoolteacher.

It is usually only children in their upper teenage years who tend to incorporate adults into projects they have designed and managed. The National Commission on Resources for Youth (1974) documented the efforts of the Student Coalition for Relevant Sex Education in New York City. A group of New York City high school students formed a coalition to petition the Board of Education for a relevant programme of sex education; they had seen too many of their peers leave school pregnant. They worked with the Planned Parenthood organization to write a proposal, but unfortunately the Board of Education lost the 8,000 signatures. They persisted, and a subsequent petition led to meetings and a favourable response from the school's Chancellor. As a result of these efforts, peer counsellors were hired in the schools offering referral services and information on problems of pregnancy and venereal disease. In a related vein, teenage students from a school in Paranoá, a low income settlement on the outskirts of Brasilia, designed and directed a video report on how pregnant teenagers feel about being pregnant and what advice they have for other teenagers.

Regrettably, projects like these, on the highest rung of the ladder of participation, are all too rare. The reason, I believe, is not the absence of a desire to be useful on the part of teenagers. It is rather the absence of caring adults attuned to the particular interests of young people. We need people who are able to respond to the subtle indicators of energy and compassion in teenagers.

'Animator' is the term used in some countries to describe the kind of professional who knows how to give life to the potential in young people. Street workers, an expanding profession in certain developing countries, are wonderful examples of animators, to be described in the section on Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances.





## V. RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

Some of the more practically oriented child advocates reading this booklet may react to the term ‘research’ as irrelevant and even contrary to community participation. If one truly wishes to involve people in decision making, however, rather than simply having them carry out the manual phase of projects, they must be involved in their design. This requires analysis and reflection - what is commonly called ‘research’.

There are many domains in which children’s competence and ability to participate is undervalued. My first awareness of the problem came when I began to do research on children’s knowledge of the environment over two decades ago. The methodological literature concerning research with children was primarily in the field of psychology. It gave me little indication that children could become partners in a research endeavour. In fact, the predominant quality of the relationship between researcher and child in much of psychology was one of deception, whereby the investigator had all the questions, yet the reasons for these questions were not understood by the child. Even anthropology, which might be expected to have a different emphasis, given its sensitive approach to interviewing, had given very little thought to working directly with children. Its emphasis with regard to children has been, until recently, almost entirely upon childrearing, with the information coming from parents and from direct observation of children, rather than from any talk with children.

I learned quickly from children that if an adult has a genuine interest in their lives which they can comprehend, then they are most enthusiastic in their participation. The most common resistance from investigators to interviews with children is the fear of receiving inaccurate information. This is based on the belief that children have poor memories which are highly subject to the power of suggestion, and that they have a strong desire to please the interviewer by saying the ‘right’ thing. In fact, even five year old children can provide highly accurate information when it is recalled spontaneously and is of relevance to them. Children do not have the same competence in communicating as adults but this does not mean that information from children is invalid. It rather means that we need to be sensitive to children’s development and find methods which maximize their ability to speak about issues which concern them in a manner which is most comfortable to them.

Unfortunately most social science research with children is still of the distant’ adult controlled type: questionnaires and structured interviews which barely scrape the surface of what children are able to tell. Universities in North America have in recent years become stringent about obtaining permission from both parent and child, but this is usually simply a strategy of obtaining a legal safeguard rather than truly empowering the child in the decision. It is no accident that almost all psychological research involving interviews with children occurs within school settings. Such pro forma statements as “may I interview you?” or “you are allowed to say no” are carried out with in these highly authoritarian institutions where expectations from teachers and principals give little real freedom of choice. Most psychological investigations would have a much more difficult time obtaining such child volunteers’ in streets and playgrounds.

When I began to develop applied research on the quality of children’s environments and ways to improve them, it became clear to me that there were other reasons, beyond validity of the data, why children’s participation in research was important. In most cities, people, particularly in poor communities, are not involved in decisions concerning their environment, even in such obvious settings as public open space. My training had previously led me to believe that careful



Teenagers in Paranoá, a low-income settlement outside Brasilia, using a video system to document community problems as part of their school curriculum.

behavioural research on children’s use and experience of the environment was all that was required to guide city planners and designers in making decisions appropriate for children. Not only is this model of rational planning and design naive, but it also increases the alienation of people from the planning process by pretending that research data can speak for them. Gradually I moved towards a model of research in which I worked, with children and child caretakers, to carry out research on their environments which they could then use as a basis for their own planning and design of environments, or as the basis for their own arguments to city agencies.

Meanwhile an approach, called Participatory Action Research, or sometimes just Participatory Research, was emerging for work with adults, particularly in developing countries. It is designed as an alternative to conventional applied research by helping people learn to conduct their own



In an attempt to create safe play opportunities in the South Bronx, New York, the Children's Environments Research Group involved people of all ages in planning and design workshops. In this photograph young teenagers identify locations where the activities of drug dealers prevent their use of public open spaces.

research. A brief account of Participatory Research principles is necessary as an introduction to their specific application in research with children.

## THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

Just as 'participation' can mean many things, so can 'participatory research'. Before highlighting some of the controversies it is useful to consider the common features of all participatory research. Fundamentally, it rejects the social division of mental and manual labour. It is often called Participatory 'Action' Research in order to stress that research and action should go together and be carried out by the same people. Some describe this as a de-professionalization of research. I see it as a 're-professionalization', with new roles for the researcher as a democratic participant. In summary, its main features are: (a) that the research be carried out by or with the people concerned; (b) the researcher feels a commitment to the people and to their control of the analysis; (c) research begins with a concrete problem identified by the participants themselves; and (d) it proceeds to investigate the underlying causes of the problem so that the participants can themselves go about addressing these causes. Throughout this process, the researcher has the obvious role of technically assisting in the process of the research. A less obvious, but very important role for the researcher is to use whatever knowledge or insights she may have of the larger causes influencing the problem, and to engage in a democratic dialogue with the participants over these larger causes. Through the process of carrying out this participatory research the participants not only transform some conditions related to a practical problem in their lives, but they also educate themselves about their general situation, thereby empowering themselves more generally for future action.

Beyond these basic agreed upon principles there are disagreements among different researchers depending on their political ideology and philosophy of how knowledge is generated. The major disagreement has to do with the extent to which Marxist theory is understood by the participants and thereby incorporated into their analysis of the problem. Marxist critics have argued that much participatory research is of the simple 'pragmatic' kind which says that if people are involved it must be good. Participation and action alone, they say, is not enough to transform people's lives. Action, it is pointed out, is required even to maintain things the way they are! The argument continues that if one wishes to change conditions, one must be sure to identify and transform the causes which matter and this involves bringing the participants into a deeper understanding of their condition. There has been more talk of the need for such approaches than there have been good demonstrations of it. One of the real problems seems to be getting participants to become interested in theoretical analyses which go too far beyond their own analysis of practical problems. Another is the danger of being too pedagogic and paternal, and losing sight of the participatory (democratic) nature of the exchange and the role of the outside researcher. My own belief is that when people are involved in successful research and action on their own behalf, it encourages them to do more of the same, and that through this kind of escalation they come to face the barriers to change themselves. In this way, there naturally comes a time to help participants with an analysis of some of the more hidden and intransigent forces which the researcher may know of. In summary, a researcher should enter participatory action research being clear about his own theory of social change and should be ready to share this with the participants in a democratic way rather than insisting upon a timetable which is his.





Children in a school in East Harlem, New York City prepare materials to send to their 'pen pals' in Readsboro, a small town in rural Vermont. In the Environmental Exchange Project all subjects of the school curriculum are organized around the study of the neighbourhood to the maximum degree possible. The children spend the school year preparing a book describing their neighbourhood, developing alternative plans. Important neighbourhood sites are selected for study by the children offer interviewing residents of all ages. At the end of the year, this document can be used as a guide for parents, city planners and elected officials. Regularly, throughout the year, the children send their findings to their 'pen pals' living in a dramatically different community who are also producing a book about change in their community. Towards the end of the year the children visit their 'twin' community for two or three days and the children lead their 'pen pals' around the sites.



The use of 3D models to enable children to design housing which satisfies their own needs in Bristol, England

## SCHOOLS AS A BASE FOR COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

For the past two decades, the United Kingdom has provided hundreds of interesting examples of children's research and participation in community planning issues, particularly in the elementary schools. There appears to be a combination of reasons why this should have happened in this country more than others. The primary one is probably the relatively 'open' nature of the British elementary schools where school head-teachers, with relatively high degrees of autonomy, have been able to establish with their staff their own particular philosophy of teaching. In a large proportion of schools the chosen philosophy sees children as active participants in their curriculum - asking questions as well as giving answers. This commonly involves children moving around the class room, or even the whole school, in small groups in pursuit of solutions to some collective problem or theme of study shared by the whole class of children. Combining this with the traditional recognition of the values of 'field study' in British education results in some schools where children conduct research with the community beyond the school.

The British Government provided an important impetus for this trend by concluding in their 'People and Planning' that public participation should be central to all environmental planning decisions. To other important factors was added the influence of a key figure: Colin Ward, an architect, planner, teacher, and social commentator became Education Officer for the British Town and Country Planning Association. From this position he launched a highly effective journal for schoolteachers called the *Bulletin for Environmental Education*, recently renamed *Streetwise*. Ten times a year Brit-

ish teachers received this journal describing projects throughout the United Kingdom in which children investigated their urban surroundings: how they came to be and what they might, become.

In much British community research in the schools, children simply report their research findings to the community residents. In most urban settings, where adults as well as children are unaware of planning problems and alternative solutions, this can be a valuable activity for the community. Sometimes, however, the children's research is also presented to town planners. In this simple way hundreds of geography and environmental studies teachers in the UK have been able to contribute to their children's understanding of community planning by allowing them to participate in small, but realistic projects. Meanwhile, their learning of the traditional concepts and skills of geography, environmental studies, and local history is improved by adding the motivation of investigating a real problem, both scientifically and humanistically.

Some local government town planning departments have played a valuable role in supporting schools in their efforts to involve children in the community. Many planning departments have 'School Liaison Officers'. In the past this might have been the kind of person you will remember from your own childhood - a fireman or police man visiting the school to describe what constitutes good behaviour in the community. Many planners have interpreted their school liaison job in a much more participatory manner.

Given the difficulty of initiating community participation within the schools, it is often better to think of developing outside resources which the schools can use. An excellent example is the concept of 'Urban Studies Centres', again from Britain. The Notting Dale Urban Studies Centre, in the heart of a multicultural area of West London served as a model for this concept. The most frequent visitors are children from surrounding schools who use it as a base for conducting research on the local environment. For example, in investigating existing housing conditions as a basis for a housing proposal, they carry note pads, tape recorders, and cameras and interview residents, housing experts, builders, and government officials. When they return to the Centre, tape recordings are transcribed, photographs printed, and reports prepared. Materials assembled by previous groups are pulled out of files for reference and comparison. Teachers and Centre staff assist children with their tasks, engage them in discussion, and offer guidance in making decisions when requested. Working together in small groups, the children sift through, discuss, and interpret their material. Sometimes they put it in the form of a newspaper to take back for printing and circulating around their school. The Centre is also used by children from beyond the city as a base for exploring city life. There is even dormitory space for a whole class of children to spend a week on such research.

As well as serving as a base for schools, the Urban Studies Centre also became of great value to local residents as a place to discuss local planning issues. Over the course of time, much useful material for planning decisions has been collected by children working at the Centre. Its archives are a rare combination of traditional data and residents' perceptions: statistics, minutes, briefs, case studies, correspondence, newspapers, and the students' own documentation. Over time the children gradually add to the archival and survey resources of the Centre, helping it become more and more a community resource. In this way it has established a political potential as a centre for community participation which would be difficult to achieve with in even the most open minded of community schools.



At the Notting Dale Urban Studies Centre, children put together an issue of the Silchester Sun, a community newspaper, using information collected from the community with the help of cameras and tape recorders.



Traditional playgrounds with fixed equipment are most interesting to children when they are being built or dismantled. Consequently, some countries, particularly those of northern Europe, have developed 'adventure playgrounds' with many materials and much participation by children in building them. This example is from Harbourfront Adventure Playground in Toronto, Canada.

The following account by Joe Benjamin, one of the playleaders who pioneered adventure playgrounds in England in the 1950s, captures some of the special qualities of this profession and its value for encouraging participation and social cooperation among children (Benjamin, 1974). Drawing from his daily log, he describes the growth of huts built by the children:

*Huts are now becoming utility or public service establishments; the first being the "White Hotel". This was followed by a fire station, complete with home-made ladders, and a first-aid post called "Shanty Town Hospital", manned by a staff of three Red Cross lads, a girl of thirteen and two very junior orderlies aged eight and nine years. The medical staff have built a waiting room onto the hospital and have produced their own blanket and armchair. They are also making a stretcher... The most interesting feature of these dens lay more in the way they were used than in the actual construction. All of the 'public service' dens became functional: the hospital staff took over first aid, the fire department patrolled the various bonfires, the 'Cop Shop' police arrested wrongdoers and tried them in open court. In all these cases, the initiative had come from the children, and I had seen my own role primarily as that of a supervisor to ensure fair play and secondly to pick up the ideas of the children and suggest how these might be developed (page 52).*

Later on, Joe Benjamin describes how the children's participation in management of the playgrounds activities led them quite easily into community service:

*The children, looking for a realistic activity, took to sawing as they took to the building of dens. The materials were equally available, and there were sufficient tools (in this case twenty-four-inch bow-saws) to meet our needs. My own role, again, was merely to ensure that the different groups did not intrude in each other's activities - a situation much more difficult to control in the limited space of the hut than in the playground. There was no developing pattern as was seen with the dens or with other activities in the hut, except that week after week, with never a variation, actual 'production figures' increased. The scheme first began early in January 1957, when six pensioners each received a sack of logs. It ended when I took a break before Easter. By this time our list of pensioners had grown to twenty and our deliveries to 176 sacks. Deliveries had been made each Saturday morning by means of a pram, truck and barrow over an area extending to more than a quarter of a mile from the playground in each direction (pp. 69-70).*

## VI. PLAY AND WORK: THE DIFFERENT REALITIES IN INDUSTRIALIZED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Play and work are often presented as opposing categories: play representing all that is spontaneous and enjoyable, and work representing all that is obligatory and boring. Children are supposed to play; adults are supposed to work. A little honest reflection will lead many people to question these simple categories. Some conceptual discussion is certainly necessary as a preface to any discussion of children's participation in decision-making. In many countries youth are trapped in childhoods where no work is allowed until they are at least 15 or 16 years of age, well beyond the age where play alone is fulfilling. Meanwhile, in many developing countries a lot of work in the family is carried out by five-year-olds, and older children are often exploited in grinding industrial or agricultural labour. There is little time for play.

There is a strong romantic tradition in the West which sees childhood as a special period where innocence, spontaneity, fantasy, and creativity reign. There is also considerable support from contemporary child development theory that early childhood should be a time for allowing spontaneous activity through play. In addition, there is a strong literary tradition for children which stresses the culture of childhood: children with other children playing and working in solidarity and trying to make sense of the confusing, and often unreasonable, world of adults. Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn are in this category. Children should have opportunities to play together in unprogrammed ways in order to learn to cooperate successfully and to build 'communities' themselves. It is perhaps in these relatively autonomous worlds of play that children take in the culture they are being handed by their parents, schoolteachers, the mass media, and others. Outside of the institutional competitive world of schools and sports, and recreation programmes, created by adults for children, they can find in their free play a place to participate with one another in building their own communities.

Child psychologists, since the 1930s, have bolstered the conception that play is important for children's development, particularly in the preschool years, and that children should be protected from the world of work. Parents are told in many childrearing books that play, carried out in free time with limited obligations, is the place where children learn in a safe and spontaneous way many of the skills for participation in adult society. There has been no such clear wisdom expressed concerning adolescents, other than their need for school education. Teenagers struggle with little guidance to find meaningful activities outside school. In recent years the pressure for school performance has been extended downwards into the elementary schools as parents push their young children to achieve now for a better future as adults. Even kindergartens, traditionally a haven for play, in some countries are becoming centres for academic pursuits.

For many people, children's play means climbing, swinging, and sliding. Certainly these are part of play, but if one observes children playing with one another in an environment rich with materials, what they are doing looks a lot like work. It is for this reason that the static traditional playgrounds with fixed equipment are most interesting to children when they are being built or dismantled. Consequently, the countries of Northern Europe have developed 'adventure playgrounds', places with many materials and much participation by children in building them. Squint a little and children in an adventure playground look like adult workers at a building site.

There are many theories of play, but common to most of them is the concept of a desire for competence. One of the great writers of child development and educational theory, Maria Montessori, described play as "the work of the child". Much of play is a training ground for later participation with adults in work: learning the properties of materials, developing physical skills, exploring tool use, and social cooperation. Unfortunately, opportunities for free (unprogrammed) play with peers in resource-rich outdoor settings are declining in the West due to a combination of forces: fear for children's outdoor safety, parents' work patterns, and growing pressures for academic achievement. Many early childhood experts argue against the erosion of children's freedom to play, but parents, particularly from the middle classes, anxious for their children to find work in a technocratic society, push for school work, failing to recognize the benefits of free play to their child's social and emotional development. Free play is difficult to replace in the adult-controlled settings of school and recreation programmes, which are supervised, individualistic, and competitive.

The genesis of the play and recreation movement in the West at the beginning of this century was the desire to remove children from the streets where they might cause trouble and get in the way of adult business. This movement was also designed to foster children's physical development. Recognition of the value of play to children's social, emotional, and intellectual development has been much slower to take hold with the general public. Since the Second World War there has been a small, vocal movement arguing for a more important place for play in the public agenda for children (see International Association for the Child's Right to Play). There is a clear link between the paucity of engaging opportunities and the boredom and delinquency of young people. If it were possible to convince government agencies of this link, the



play movement would be well funded and would quickly gain momentum. In the meantime, play is trivialized by parents and capitalized on by the corporate world which invents expensive systems of toys and electronic technology with which children act out pre-programmed dramas.

The adventure playgrounds, which I have referred to are an interesting institutional response to this issue in industrially advanced nations. Children from eight to eighteen years of age create their own play worlds with a diversity of materials. They are supported, but not directed, by 'playleaders', a rare kind of professional adult who understands the need children feel to direct their own activities but who also recognizes that they like to have caring adults to turn to from time to time for both technical and emotional support. Children who have had opportunities with one another in cooperative settings like adventure play grounds are, I suspect, more likely to be able to work together on participatory community projects with other children and adults than children who have spent an equivalent amount of time in traditional civics or government classes in school and are otherwise limited in their recreational pursuits to activities programmed by adults. Regrettably, the trend in the West is to increase the hours spent in schooling and programmed recreation; for most of their remaining hours children watch television.

What is needed, then, are occasions when children, adolescents, and adults can each be alone with their age group, and other occasions when they can be together to help, share, and learn from one another. This sounds simple but it is in fact different from the simple-minded, polarized arguments one commonly hears among those who talk of too much control by adults of children, and those who fear children have too much freedom. Both of these extremes imply that children only learn from adults and that they do this in a one-way process from adult to child. Once one accepts that the learning of culture is a much more complex story than this, with everyone learning from everyone else — children from children and even adults from children - then children's participation becomes a less radical concept. With this realization comes the recognition that all children to different degrees are already participating in society and the job of child-rearing is to recognize and support this diversity of valuable experiences.

While young people in the industrially advanced countries struggle for competence in a world with out work for their age group and with increasingly programmed education and recreation activities, most of their peers in the developing countries are working. Research from 50 non-industrial societies reveals that the most common age for the assignment of responsibility of the following tasks is five to seven years of age: the care of younger siblings, tending animals, household chores, gathering materials like firewood, and running errands (Rogoff et al., 1976). There is usually time for play in between chores in these rural settings. This greater involvement of children in the work of the family in non-industrial countries presumably does not reflect greater awareness of children's competence in these cultures, but simply the greater need for work in the family economy. With industrialization, families may move to cities and children are then often given more menial work, away from the family, involving repetitive tasks and less free time for play. The very luckiest children find jobs demanding skills which they can develop and time for education to help them further in their search for a meaningful place in society. For most working children and youth, however, the work is better called 'labour': it is not meaningful and they did not choose it, and it is often exploitative or hazardous. They are effectively slaves working in factories, plantations, or mines. Choice is an important distinction in determining whether a child is participating or being exploited. When, however, a young child is trapped in a house working all the time, it is hard to blame parents for exploitation if they themselves are doing this out of economic necessity. On the other hand, it is important for the child to know that the family is being exploited by the situation, and that the pressures put upon her parents prevent them from offering her the childhood she deserves. It is also important that families and societies be encouraged to reassess the 'necessity' of child labour to ensure it has not simply become an excuse for governmental or societal inaction.

Work for a child can be highly participatory and hence educational. If it is somehow supplemented with sufficient education to allow a child future choice of alternative work it need not be exploitative. When it is necessary for a family that a child work, this work could be made into an educational experience by creatively modifying or supplementing it, although this is extremely difficult for families which themselves are on the borderline of survival. There are instances where cultures clash on this issue. The East End of London, like the Lower East Side of New York, has seen waves of different immigrant cultural groups employing their children in the clothing industry in order for their low-income families to establish a foothold in the new culture. Asian families in London are a recent group to struggle with the government over compulsory schooling (Ward, 1978). One can understand the legislative history which led Britain to protect children from work in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is, however, far from clear that an all or nothing solution is appropriate, particularly when a nation has a high unemployment rate facing young adults at the end of a very long period of schooling.

The place of work in children's lives in the industrialized and developing countries is a complex subject which cannot simply be resolved only through single pieces of legislation which prohibit children from working or which require more schooling. Experience from the industrial nations should tell us that the solution for the developing nations is not



ROGER HART



Girls from low-income families throughout the world, like this seven year old in Brazil, work from a very early age looking after children.

SPIEGELMAN / UNICEF



For most working children in the developing nations, their work is better called 'labour': It is not meaningful and they did not choose it.

just more and more schooling, for we are now seeing the effects of youth who have had no opportunities to discover the pleasures of meaningful work. Our solutions must therefore involve not only a recognition of the grim realities of exploitative labour balanced against the economic realities of a child's family and the need for income; we must also consider a child's desire to develop competence which is relevant to the kinds of work demanded of her, both now and in the future. We need more thoughtful development and evolution of a variety of solutions within each culture involving unique combinations of play, work, and school. From these different experiences, every child should be able to find a route to a meaningful role in his or her community and to discover both the rights and the responsibilities for participating with others in the development of this community.

ROGER HART



In non-industrial societies throughout much of the world, children work for the family from five years of age onwards. Rosetta, a ten-year-old girl from Piquatuba, in the Brazilian Amazon, is doing her regular washing of dishes in the river.

## VII. CHILDREN IN ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Numerous examples have been given in this Essay of children's participation in community development. But many children do not live in the kinds of relatively stable families which enable this kind of public participation. UNICEF uses the term 'children in especially difficult circumstances' to describe those children with no family or who are from a family so traumatized by disaster, poverty, armed conflict, or family dissension that it cannot meet their basic needs. Still others live with abusive or neglectful families and need to be protected from them. The examples in this section are drawn from the developing nations. This is by no means meant to imply that there are no such children in the industrially advanced countries. However, because of the economic problems facing the developing nations, the scale of the problem is greater.

Like so many over-protected children in the industrially advanced nations, these children find it difficult to develop as competent human beings and to find a meaningful role in society, but for very different reasons. As a result, the kind of participation they initially need is different. They need to be given the opportunity to reflect and act upon their own lives. This does not necessarily exclude them from extending their efforts soon afterwards to the benefit of the larger community of which they are a part. Fabio Dallape argues, from his work with street children in Africa, for the importance of reminding children of the lives of their peers as they begin to free themselves from their own difficult circumstances. If one fails to do this there is, as Paolo Freire warns, the great danger of the oppressed becoming the oppressors after liberating themselves.

Great strides have been made in recent years in the way some governments work with 'street children', those children who work and often live on the streets. Instead of seeing these street children as a problem for society to remove from the streets and to 'reform' or to protect through institutionalization of one kind or another, it is increasingly recognized that these children need to be given opportunities to understand and improve their own lives.

Some of the best examples of high levels of participation are to be found in the work that street workers are doing with street children. Street workers, many of whom were once street children themselves, are creative members of an expanding profession. They have in recent years, in a number of countries, dramatically transformed approaches to street children. No longer are these children arbitrarily placed in institutions. The new approach begins with establishing a rapport with the children and understanding their current situation as a basis for improving their own lives. Whenever possible this involves helping them to return to their families. Where this is not possible it means supporting them to form alternative 'families' or 'communities', and a healthy means of economic survival. All along it means recognizing and building upon the resiliency and creativity of the children themselves.

BUTTERFLIES



Street and working children demonstrating on their own behalf. This rally was organized by the NGO Forum for Street and Working Children in New Delhi, India.

## SCRAP COLLECTORS IN NAIROBI

A common dilemma in developing programmes for street and working children is between guaranteeing their protection in the immediate or short-term versus adopting a strategy which maximizes the development of autonomy and hence reduces their dependence upon external providers. Fabio Dallape describes an instance from his records as past director of the Undugu Society in Nairobi, Kenya:

*Children at risk living on the street in Mathare Valley, a slum in Nairobi, had to work in order to subsidize the scarce income of their families. Undugu Society, an NGO working with children in difficult circumstances, found itself involved with a group of children collecting scrap metal, paper, and plastic bags. They were working mainly in the mornings in different areas of the city collecting whatever they could put their hands on. They would move alone, in pairs, or in small groups, but with each one working independently. In the afternoon they would try to sell what each one had collected: the sales were also done individually. The price was fixed by the buyer who would offer about half of the market price. The children had no alternative since they badly needed the money on a daily basis, and any storing of the material would carry the risk of being stolen.*

*Macharia, a social worker of Undugu, had an opportunity to meet them one by one at their working places. He spent a few weeks just being with them, talking, listening, joking, and sharing ideas on places where they could find scrap metal or paper. When he felt confident that they would appreciate spending some time with him, he indicated to them a place where they could find him. It was not in his office, though the office was not far out from the slum. It was an empty hut that Undugu rented for children to come and play. The time was fixed for early afternoon after they came back from work. Maina, a musician of Undugu Band Beat 75, was there with his guitar. They were playing, singing, and dancing. Maina started teaching them how to play the guitar, and together they composed song reflecting episodes of their lives. The sessions lasted only two hours, for the children had to go and sell what they had collected in the morning.*

*A couple of months later a teacher was hired on the children's request, to help them read the weighing scale to find out the weight of what they were selling and calculate the price, Undugu provided the same model of a weighing scale used by the merchants. The children had to learn how to read the numbers and the possible tricks of the merchants in positioning the scale in ways that could modify the reading. Numerous exercises on the use and misuse of the scale became like a game for them. It was much harder to teach them how to calculate the price, especially if they had to deal with halves and quarters of a kilo. The price per kilo was always established by the buyer and could vary from day to day, but the children could calculate the price of the material based on a "guess" price from the merchants. Very soon they realized how much and in how many ways they were cheated. Was it possible to defend themselves and their rights?*

*The children had lengthy discussions on this problem. They identified two possible solutions: First they could sell the material altogether to middlemen. Creating competition amongst middlemen could give them negotiating power. Second they could sell scrap metal directly to the factory. The price would be fixed and there would be less probability of cheating. The children had to guarantee a sizable quantity to justify transport with a lorry, and it was necessary to look for storage facilities.*

*Undugu facilitated the second option because it was more remunerative than the first one. Undugu provided storage and an anticipated payment on a daily basis to each child. This option created dependency of the children upon Undugu. The advantages were that the children felt more and more linked to Undugu's school where they learned mathematics, reading, and writing.*

*The first option would have given them less money but much more knowledge on organization, management, and communication; all skills needed to run a business. They would have learned how to be independent from the organization and how to be dependent upon one another.*

*Undugu's social workers were trapped by the immediate advantages for the boys, Their empathy and involvement in the daily suffering of the children prevented them from continuing the process of participation that would have brought the children to completely control their own activity.*

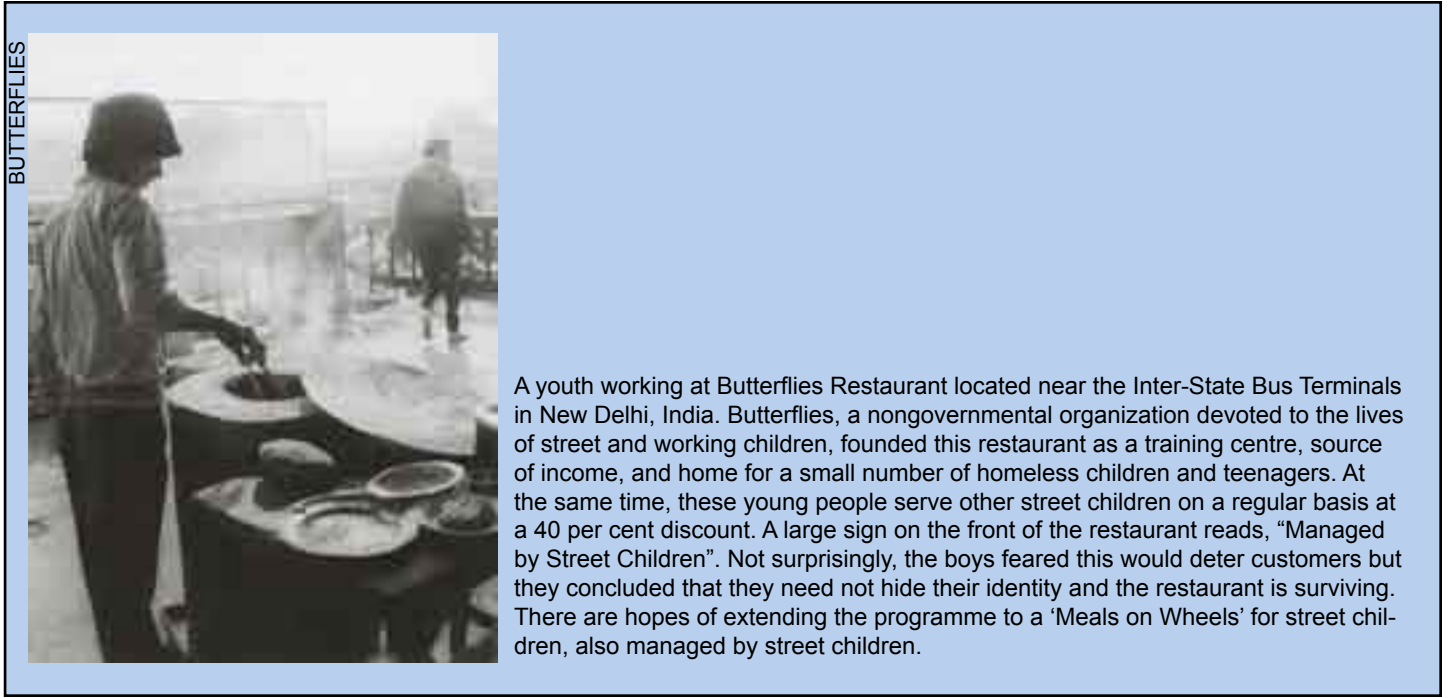
In recent years, a remarkable movement has been created with street children in Brazil. Following democratic principles it has been possible for 'street educators', as they are called in Brazil, to collaborate with street children at the local level throughout Brazil and to coordinate these many groups in a powerful movement to give a voice to these children and improve their lives. In May, 1986, the first National Street Children's Congress was held in Brasilia. Four hundred and fifty children came from groups throughout Brazil. The original goal of the event was simply to develop solidarity between the many separate groups of street children, though the choice of Brasilia as a location was designed to sensitize the authorities. However, because the children were so organized and articulate during the debates, the press responded with enormous enthusiasm and the congress became a landmark event in creating public awareness about the lives of street children. It was clear that the public and policy-makers had never before been shown the reality of street children's worlds. This event was powerful, not simply through fortuitous timing and a clever use of the press. It was successful because children who previously had no public voice were prepared and were truly able to speak out about their concerns to a massive naive audience.

Why did this event happen in Brazil at this time? There are probably two closely interrelated reasons. First, though there was a dictatorship, street workers had been working hard throughout the previous decade to apply principles of empowerment through the development of self-awareness with street children. These principles are best known by educators outside of Brazil via the book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire, though there are other influential proponents within Brazil. The second factor was probably that democracy was finally dawning and the nation was ready to hear the voices of a repressed minority as a symbol of this new phase in the nation's history.

It is possible to identify some of the common principles adopted by Brazilian street educators which have been so successful. First, they work with small groups of children with each group co-managed by children and street educators. Secondly, discussions, activities, and plans are always based upon the reality of the children themselves - the children raise the themes, develop the activities, and construct the rules for their own functioning, with the street educator working only as a facilitator. The children elect those educators to work with them with whom they feel most comfortable. Most of these educators, at least in the past, have been volunteers.

In 1989, a Second National Congress of Street Children was held in Brasilia, this time with 700 children from all over Brazil and a selection from other Latin American countries. This time the politicians felt obliged to listen. The children came from state and regional conferences where they had been debating the draft of a Child and Adolescent Statute. Instead of a few representatives, there was a large scale occupation of the senate by the children. Congressmen listened to powerful testimonies by children and many gave up their seats. From all accounts it was a very moving day for the politicians, though no doubt the press was again very important in guaranteeing that this minority group was allowed such a voice in the corridors of power.

Probably more important than the national events themselves, are the local organizations they have helped inspire. The local committees for street and working children, which are found throughout Brazil, offer opportunities for dialogue between the children, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). There has been a steadily grow-



A youth working at Butterflies Restaurant located near the Inter-State Bus Terminals in New Delhi, India. Butterflies, a nongovernmental organization devoted to the lives of street and working children, founded this restaurant as a training centre, source of income, and home for a small number of homeless children and teenagers. At the same time, these young people serve other street children on a regular basis at a 40 per cent discount. A large sign on the front of the restaurant reads, "Managed by Street Children". Not surprisingly, the boys feared this would deter customers but they concluded that they need not hide their identity and the restaurant is surviving. There are hopes of extending the programme to a 'Meals on Wheels' for street children, also managed by street children.



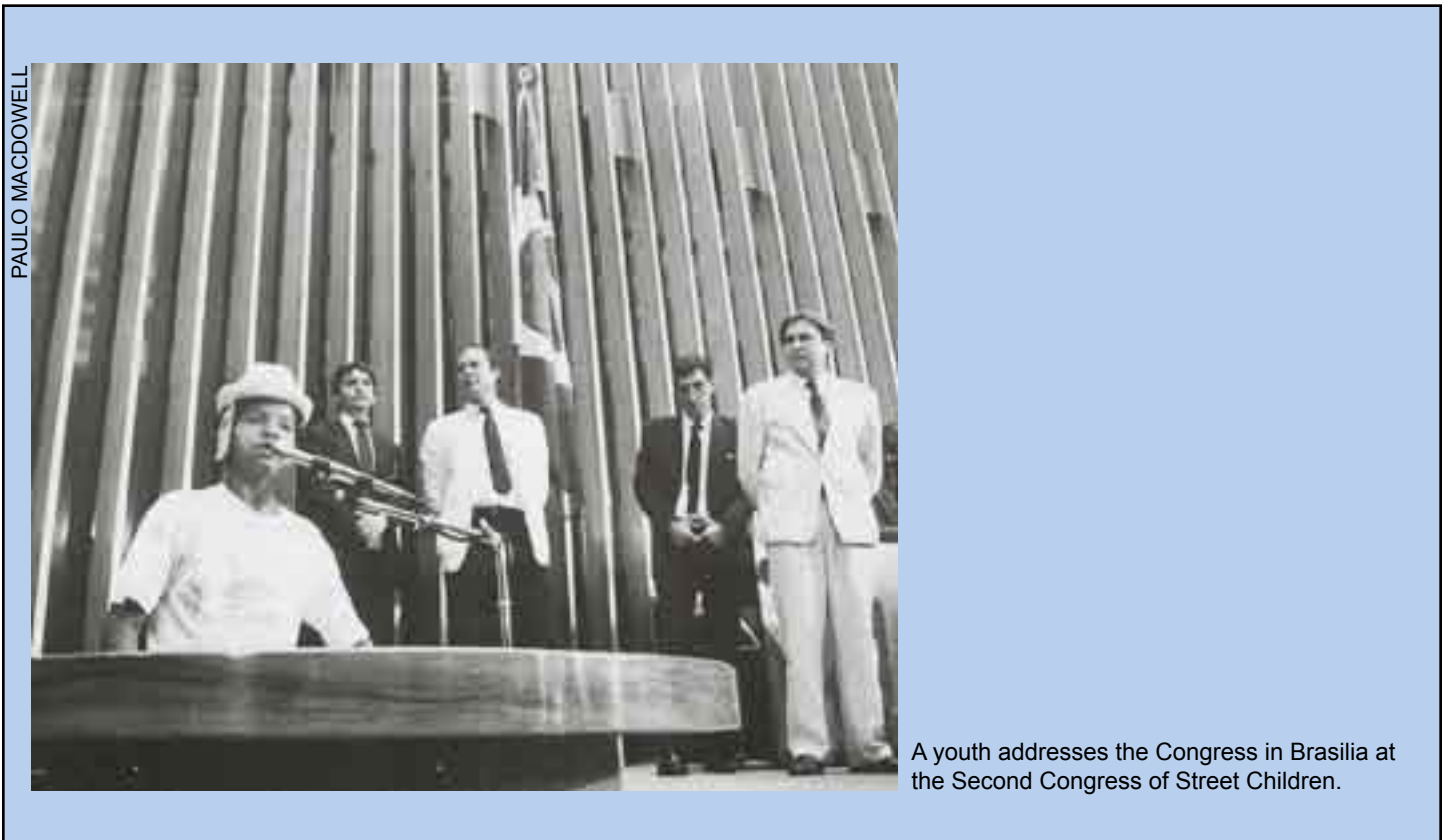
ing participation by children in these local committees as they become more confident in speaking. The result is not only a process of democratization for the children, but also for the street educators as they become more and more aware of the competence of the children and of the degree of responsibility the children can handle. 'Street educator' is probably an inappropriate term because it does not capture the truly two-way process of education: Brazilian street educators often describe with a mixture of pride and amazement how the children and teenagers educate them and demonstrate competence beyond what they could ever have imagined.

In an interesting example in Olongapo, next to the US Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines, street workers have helped street children and other working children, aged eight to eighteen years, to establish associations related to their professions. There are separate associations for newsboys, bag sellers, scavengers, pushcart boys, bus washers, and vendors. These professions have different ratios of boys and girls: for example, 90% of the vendors are girls. The associations are part of a coordinated city effort called The Working Committee for Street and Working Children. Coincident with the formation of the association as mutual support groups, the city established strong policing against prostitution and begging. Other non-governmental organizations established foster homes for abandoned children sleeping on the streets. Together, these policies of government regulations, policing, and non-governmental organizations' support for working children's own initiatives have almost eliminated children's begging and prostitution, and helped to change the attitudes of adult citizens towards the children.

The street workers work with the most influential children to get the others involved. The democratic process has been evolving since 1987 when the associations began, but the children themselves have initiated certain democratic procedures such as secret ballots at their yearly and mid-yearly evaluation meetings. The elected officers are usually in their teenage years. After the elections all officers are entitled to a three-day leadership training meeting where they study and develop methods to use with their fellow working children to develop a sense of their place in society, now and for the future.

A bank account is managed by the treasurers from each of the associations jointly with Bill Abaigar, the streetworker who coordinates the associations. Loans are taken by the children for school supplies or for starting up businesses such as purchasing plastic bags to sell, or renting a push cart.

'TATAG', as the seven associations are collectively called, carries out numerous events organized at meetings approximately each month, with the elected officers from each association. Street theatre, song, and dance performances and demonstrations in support of children's rights are some of the ways that they extend their cause to the larger community.



A youth addresses the Congress in Brasilia at the Second Congress of Street Children.

My sense from this and other similarly energetic programmes with street children in other countries, is that the street workers rely heavily upon the leadership skills of a select number of children who are well respected by other children. The danger of relying too heavily on this strategy is that democratic processes amongst the children are not fostered as much as they could be. This is an important area for debate amongst the growing profession of street workers.

For the past two years, the street childrens organizations in the Philippines have been getting together, with their participating children, for regional and national conferences. These build upon the remarkable examples of national congresses of street and working children in Brasilia since the opening up of democracy there. The purpose of these conferences is both to enable children to discuss their concerns and ideas with other children, and to communicate their mutual concerns and ideas to policy-makers. It is hard to say at this stage how effective this process is in influencing the government, but my observations are that it is very effective in building self-respect and cooperative activity through the experience of solidarity with their peers. The children select those that will represent them at the conferences. I was unable to observe this process of selection, but I understand that the children tend to choose those who have leadership skills and are articulate. The bullies are ignored and the selected representatives are often not the eldest.

ROGER HART



Bill Abaigor, a street worker in Olongapo in the Philippines, hands a membership card to one of the girls who sells plastic bags in the market. Membership in the association of street and working children involves regular meetings with her fellow bag sellers. Through this association she learns about her rights in a democratic setting with her peers.

At the weeklong 1991 National Street and Working Children's Congress in the Philippines, I observed over 100 children, aged 8 to 18 years, listen intently as they performed for one another moving dramas based on their everyday lives. Groups of children of both sexes and mixed ages work on different themes each day. In the afternoons, with the street workers' assistance, they prepare skits based on workshops held in the mornings and show one another their scripts. They portrayed problems of access to relevant education; the breakup of a family brought on by economic hardships and problems of alcohol; the inability to get a doctor quickly; and the indiscriminate use of pills because no money is available for prescriptions. Constructing these dramas enables the children to articulate to one another the nature and causes of difficulties in their lives with an obvious therapeutic benefit to them. At the same time, it enables them to begin to identify solutions they can act on and which they can persuade others to act on. Although children identified the issues during the five days of the Congress, the street workers undoubtedly facilitated the meeting and influenced them in some ways. It was clear to all attending the event, however, that this was an example of genuine participation by children in important issues.

At the end of the Congress, the children handed a resolution to the Speaker of the House and met with the President of the Senate. The Philippine Congress then incorporated some of the street children's recommendations into proposed bills. In addition to this, dozens of newspaper articles in national and local newspapers carried their concerns to the public.

**PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER**  
6 TUESDAY, APRIL 23, 1991

**MITRA WITH STREET CHILDREN**  
Speaker Ramon Mitra talks with some 60 street children who called on him yesterday at the House of Representatives on the problems of child abuse and trafficking of children. The street kids were accompanied by officials of the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

**PEOPLE'S JOURNAL**  
8 APRIL 22, 1991

**STREET KIDS IN CONGRESS**  
Kids participate in a dialogue with legislators, including Senator Basco, left, during the First National Street Children Congress, IV, at La Salle Greenhills. The children attended session on Education and Legal Protection and received responses from Social Secretary Mita Pardo de Tavera, Senators Macara and Albertina Romo, Rep. Raul Roco and Jose Ma. Larson and Gen. Rene Imperial. (Pictures: Amador Jacobo)

**Street children: Stop 'deposits' in hospitals**  
By AURORA ALAMBRA

The 100 street children who participated in the country's First National Street Children Congress are requesting hospitals to stop demanding deposits or down payments from patients who have to be confined for treatment.

The said congress was made possible by the Departments of Social Welfare and Development, DSWD in cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the National Council of Social Development Foundations.

In their 19-point list of suggestions on health, the street children — who were all housed for free at the Circulo Mission House of the La Salle Greenhills where the one-week

Turn to Page 7

Dozens of newspaper articles in the Philippines carry messages to the nation of the important issues raised by children from all over the Philippines during the week-long National Street and Working Children's Congress

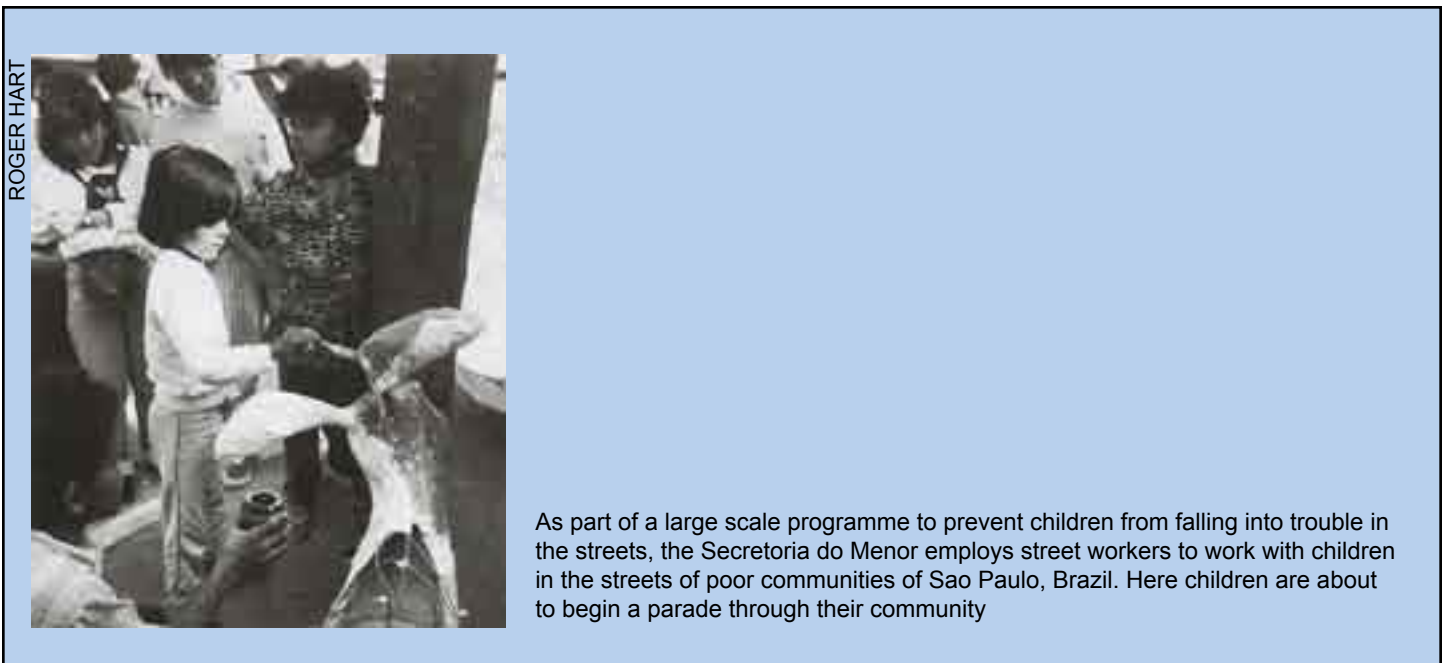
## CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH ON THEIR OWN LIVES

Children living in poverty cannot be expected to initiate projects for others, or even for their own community, if they themselves are struggling for survival. We need to find ways for these children, and to some extent for all children, to help them understand their own lives, to appreciate themselves better and to discover alternative pathways to the future. There is, of course, a large literature in the West on alternative therapeutic methods for working with children with emotional problems. Some of these are designed to enable children to make their world more comprehensible to themselves so that they can master it better.

Unfortunately, there has not yet been an appropriate response from the research communities on how to work with street children. While there has been great creativity in developing ways of working with the children from sidewalk classrooms, through drop-in health centres, to street children's professional democratic organizations, analysis of these children's problems remains orthodox, belonging to the old institutional paradigm. Street workers, for instance, keep files on their children in confidential folders rarely shared with the children themselves. Here is a great opportunity for the research community to collaborate with street workers in the development of methods which inform the street worker, satisfy the needs of institutions and funding agencies for data, and yet simultaneously inform and empower the child. Interactive graphic methods for children who are illiterate can often be an excellent introduction to the written word for children learning to read and write: mapping of their city and their daily use of it, including the locations of important supporting people and resources and feared places, could be an excellent introduction for a Street worker to a street child's life. From this could come a fuller appreciation of the child's resourceful use of the city. From it can also come the development of joint strategies for improving that child's use of the city and decreasing his or her abuse by the city.

Similar graphic approaches can be developed for enabling children to express their life history (ideally with the help of other family members). The only programme I found where children have regular access to their personal file was the Passage House for prostitute girls in Recife, Brazil. The girls frequently request to have their life histories read back to them. There are different explanations to account for this, depending upon one's theoretical orientation, but the important point is that the girls find it valuable for their development. The documentation of life histories is also an important step for the staff, of course, in exploring possibilities for family reintegration and for discovering patterns in a child's coping which may have a negative long-term effect.

Bill Kornblum and fellow sociologists in New York City have discovered a valuable way of obtaining data on the life paths of low-income, at risk, minority teenagers in Harlem who have dropped out of school. They have opened a drop-in workshop centre in Harlem and pay the teenagers for each word they write of their life history. In this way, the children develop literacy skills while also getting a chance to reflect on their lives with caring adults. The professors, meanwhile, obtain the kinds of detailed life history records, in the youths' own words, which are so rare in research with young people.





## VIII. FACTORS AFFECTING CHILDREN'S ABILITY TO PARTICIPATE

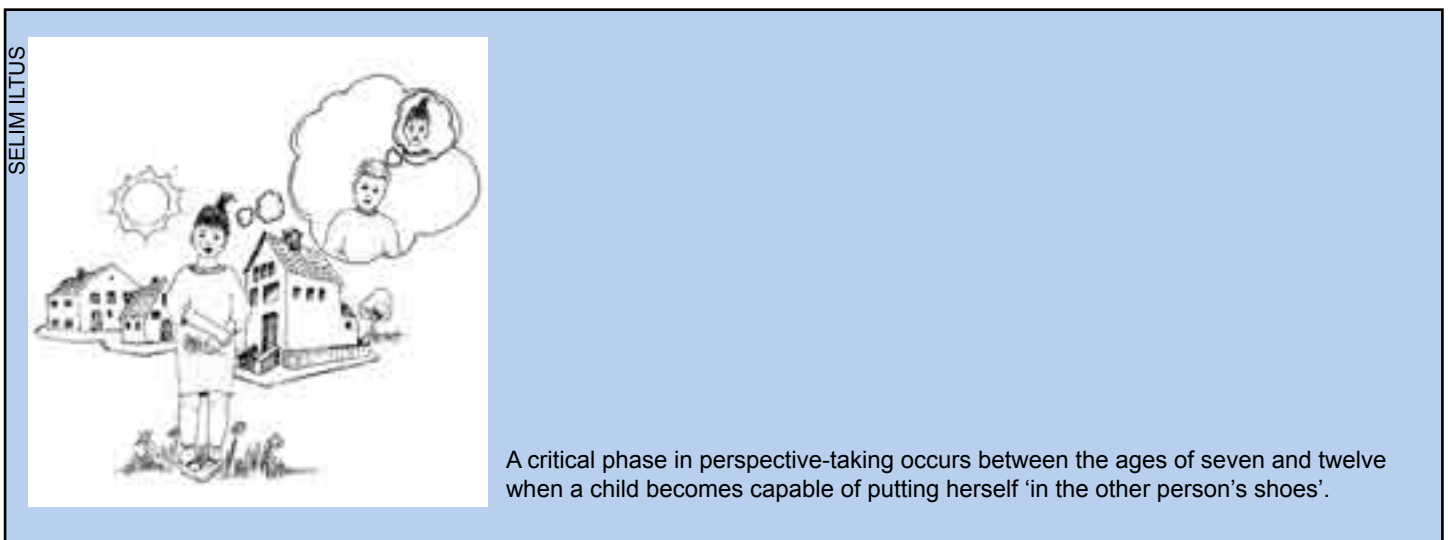
Child development is usually conceptualized as a solitary affair with an individual child gradually climbing a ladder of higher steps of ability, alone. Recently, child development theory has become more contextual, enabling us to understand better the role adults play in a child's development. Children's participation does not mean supplanting adults. Adults do, however, need to learn to listen, support, and guide; and to know when and when not to speak. One should not, therefore, think of a child's evolving capacities to participate as a simple step-like unfolding of individual abilities. One should rather think of what a child might be able to achieve in collaboration with other children and with supportive adults.

It is misguided to use simple developmental stages or age-related norms to determine what children are capable of, though it is useful to be familiar with some of the most important sequences of development, such as the development of a child's ability to take the perspective of others. It is important to remember that the ages at which these occur can vary greatly according to culture and to the individual characteristics of the child. Just as important as the unfolding of a child's ability to think and speak is the motivation behind his or her behaviour. A child who is troubled or who has low self-esteem is less likely to demonstrate her competence, to think, or to work in a group. For this reason, in attempting to facilitate the participation of children who seem less competent than might be expected, one must identify situations which will maximize a child's opportunities to demonstrate her competence. Similarly, one should also use alternative techniques for enabling different children's voices to be heard.

### SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Erik Erikson has written of a child's psychosocial need to develop competency through ever larger scales of play environments. From play with their own bodies, infants proceed to play with the small world of manageable toys, before feeling sufficiently competent to enter the world shared with others. One could undoubtedly expand this theory into other observable spheres of growing competence across the life span. Joe Benjamin, for instance, who worked for years as an adventure playground leader in the UK with delinquent youth, tells us that such playgrounds may offer an easier place than the streets for some youth to learn to master troubling issues or relationships.

Self esteem is perhaps the most critical variable affecting a child's successful participation with others in a project. It is a value judgment children make about self-worth based upon their sense of competence in doing things and the approval of others as revealed by their acceptance as intimate friends. Children with low self esteem develop coping mechanisms which are more likely to distort how they communicate their thoughts and feelings; group interaction among these children is particularly difficult to achieve. Including a wide range of situations where these children can demonstrate competence can contribute to some improvement of self esteem.



A critical phase in perspective-taking occurs between the ages of seven and twelve when a child becomes capable of putting herself 'in the other person's shoes'.



## THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSPECTIVE TAKING ABILITY

The ability to truly participate depends on a basic competence in taking the perspective of other persons. In a very limited way children can do this by the age of three, but the process of being able simultaneously to take another perspective, while maintaining one's own view, continues to develop through adolescence. The field of developmental psychology has spent considerable effort investigating this process (e.g., Selman, 1980). The ages are approximate and are developed from Western research. Most important in thinking about young people's participation is the sequence of phases in perspective-taking, and the insight that the child is actively trying to construct the world of the other, while simultaneously constructing her own understanding of that world.

The process begins in the second or third year with a child's first awareness of psychological processes in others. But while she gradually becomes more aware that another person has feelings and thoughts, there is confusion until the ages of five or six between the subjective psychological, and the objective or physical characteristics of the person's behaviour. For example, intentional and unintentional behaviours of the other person are not differentiated. Gradually the 'perspective taking ability' improves so that between five and nine years of age she becomes capable of clearly differentiating the physical and psychological characteristics of a person. She now realizes that each person has his own, unique, subjective view of the world.

Developing between the ages of seven and twelve, a child begins to be able to step outside herself to take a self-reflective look at her interactions and to realize that other people can do the same thing. This phase of 'sequential perspective taking' means that two children now realize they can put themselves 'in each other's shoes'. They also recognize now that a person may have multiple or mixed feelings, such as being interested and happy, but a little frightened. This final phase means that they are beginning to understand that they and others are capable of doing things they may not want to do. These pre-adolescents, however, cannot simultaneously coordinate the perspective of self and others.

The next stage, 'mutual perspective taking', is necessary for children to be able to organize themselves into enduring democratic groups. According to Selman, this 'generalized other' perspective arises between ten and fifteen years of age. Youth, thinking at this level, now spontaneously coordinate their perspectives with those of others.

THE PASSAGE HOUSE, RECIFE, BRAZIL



Opportunities for meaningful work can serve as valuable preventative programmes for children living in families and communities where the risk of their turning to the streets is high. In this photograph from Recife, Brazil a woman has been given a small amount of money for equipment and supplies to run a hairdressing programme for girls. She also uses this opportunity to discuss health, AIDS, prostitution, schooling, and work in small informal discussion groups. The Passage House, which developed this programme, also manages homes for prostitute girls emphasizing a high degree of participation by the girls in projects designed to improve the lives of other prostitute girls.

Beyond this mutual perspective-taking ability of adolescents Selman hypothesizes a higher level of ‘societal-symbolic perspective-taking’. A person can now imagine multiple mutual perspectives forming a generalized societal, legal, or moral perspective in which all individuals can share. A person believes others use this shared point of view in order to facilitate accurate communication and understanding. This final phase, which can emerge at any time from the age of twelve on, is obviously the one to be desired for the most fruitful cooperative projects of children.

It is clear then that even during their early elementary school years children are at least intellectually capable of working with adults; but the adults need to be sensitive to some of the limitations children have in taking the perspectives of others. Also, it must be remembered that the sequence described above is limited to an account of a child’s intellectual development and his or her logical ability to take the perspective of others. It does not take into account such factors as a child’s understanding of the different roles people have and the power they possess. This must surely influence the degree to which children think it is appropriate to take the perspective of others. For example, knowing someone in a group is a school teacher or a policeman, and knowing that these kinds of persons punish misbehaving children, may override their intellectual ability to understand the person as an individual, thereby reducing their participation.

## **SOCIAL CLASS VARIATIONS IN CHILDREN PARTICIPATION**

It is important for each of us wishing to encourage children’s participation to be aware of child-rearing patterns since we are likely to have a middle class bias. Comparisons of child-rearing in many countries reveal that families with adequate economic resources tend to value independence and autonomy while low-income families place higher value on obedience from their children. The poorer families in such cultures see obedience as the means by which their children can succeed economically. Child participation advocates therefore need to understand that a lack of independence and self-direction in the children of working, poor families may simply be an appropriate socializing response to their parents who have little freedom themselves in their daily lives - working in routinized jobs that demand obedience and efficiency. Also, poor parents may feel they do not have the time or patience for supporting children’s spontaneous activities. Furthermore, children from these backgrounds see examples in their daily lives which support what they are learning from their parents about not speaking out.

The implications of these inequalities are that advocates for children need to work doubly hard to liberate the voices of poor children, for without such extra efforts it is likely that only middle-class voices will be heard.

## **THE DIFFERENT PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES OF GIRLS AND BOYS**

While opportunities for the majority of low income children throughout the world are limited, the situation is particularly bad for girls. Their socialization emphasizes protection and dependency, not autonomy, even though they may at ten years of age already be responsible for feeding and looking after three younger siblings. In my visits to programmes in the developing world, I have observed many examples of innovative projects for street and working boys who are actively involved in evaluating and improving their own lives in a collective manner, but relatively few for girls. Whereas working boys are commonly in the streets, the girls are invisible - hidden in kitchens and backyards, involved in endless domestic chores. We need to create more special programmes of participation for these isolated, forgotten children.

In designing programmes for girls we will need to recognize the different ways girls are treated in different cultures and discover how to address the barriers to their effective participation in family, school, and community. For example, in many societies it is still assumed that boys will be decision-makers and girls will not. Integrated programmes, with girls and boys participating equally, may therefore have some special values for girls.

This section has highlighted some of the more important variables influencing children’s participation. I do not propose that programmes of community participation be designed to take account of each possible age group or every different kind of personality or behaviour problem. It is rather my intention to remind the reader that there is no single best strategy or technique for any project; diversity is the key. Projects should be designed to enable different degrees and different types of involvement by different persons and at different stages in the process.



With the aid of the local government, students from an elementary school in Pesche, Belgium, transform a garbage dump into an ecological park. Not everyone needs to participate in all aspects or phases of a project. For example, in renovating a park many younger children may not be interested in or feel competent with written plans, but may be very interested in providing physical labour. By making a project accessible and comprehensible of all stages, children, youth, and adults with different developmental capacities and interests can participate in different phases.

## IX. THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

It is frequently said by professionals working in international development that community participation slows the social and economic development efforts of developing nations. Such comments, and the statistics which have some times been used to support them, have not been sufficient to stop what appears to be a growing international trend towards local community participation. For those projects where the end product or programme is for the participants themselves, the arguments for participation are particularly strong. But for young people, even in such obvious examples as the design of classrooms, playgrounds, sports facilities, or afterschool programmes, participation is rare.

There are additional and more important benefits to a society beyond the short-term one of making a programme or product more appropriate for the user. Unfortunately, these benefits have the kind of indirect, long-term impact that cannot be easily measured quantitatively. The benefits are of two major kinds: those that enable individuals to develop into more competent and confident members of society, and those that improve the organization and functioning of communities.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Adolescents struggle to find meaningful roles in society. If they do not find opportunities to develop their competence in ways that are responsible they will find others that are irresponsible. Mark Francis, a landscape architect from California, is an expert in the participation of people of all ages in landscape design. He explains how his concern for youth participation came from his own experiences: "I was good in blowing up mailboxes. I just felt that there was no place to be. There was no place for me and no place that would give me the responsibilities that I thought I had to get and because of that I created a lot of negative energy." It is because of this that much of the writing about youth participation projects concerns the provision of opportunities for delinquents.

It is unfortunate that for most public administrators the only value of young people's participation is to reduce delinquency and vandalism by 'keeping them off the streets'. Nevertheless, it is useful, whenever trying to express the value of participation to more conservative thinkers, to explain that involvement of young people in projects leads to a sense of

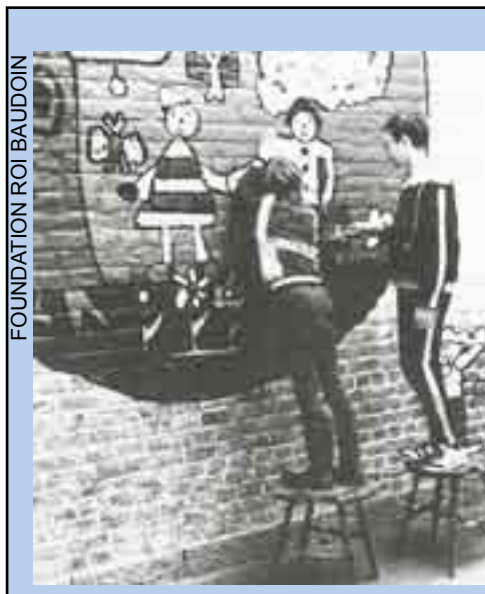
responsibility for the maintenance and protection of those products which are created. Hundreds of sculptors, muralists, playground designers, and gardeners who have conducted community projects in New York City, for example, attest to this with personal anecdotes about the absence of vandalism and graffiti. The long-term effects of involvement in other kinds of projects cannot be as easily observed as they can with building projects, but they surely exist nevertheless. Participation not only allows a child the right to have a voice; it is equally valuable in enabling children to discover the rights of others to have their own very different voices. Because they are concerned with real projects, dialogue and negotiation with other young people and adults is inevitable. There is an important spin-off benefit from developing the skills of social cooperation for a child's personal development.

The growth of autonomy in a child is not simply a matter of gradually pulling away from dependence on a parent. Piaget, the Swiss developmental psychologist, demonstrated through the game of marbles that cooperation and mutual agreement between equals is necessary for the development of autonomy. He found that children learn a game of marbles not by accepting the authority of one of the players regarding the rules, but by developing the rules in a cooperative way. From discussion, the children discover different children's points of view and reach their own consensus. Piaget argued that if they are always subject to authority and do not have opportunities for establishing rules through relationships with mutual respect, they cannot develop as autonomous selves. The blooming of a personality through the development of autonomy depends then on these social relationships. Seen in this light, children's participation is not just an approach to developing more socially responsible and cooperative youth; it is the route to the development of a psychologically healthy person.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

'Communities', in the broadest sense of the word, are constructed. To support children or youth in working together is, by definition, to be engaged in community development. Through positive group experiences children discover that organizing can work in their self-interest. Such mutual self-interest is probably the strongest base for cultural and political organization.

The physical environment can be particularly useful for community building because it offers opportunities for a group to see the impact of its joint efforts in a direct and lasting way. Early pioneers in the USA found it necessary to ask their neighbours to help them in the large task of building a barn as they struggled to survive in their new land. The community spirit, which such group projects engendered, was great, and the term 'barn raising' is still used today as a metaphor for community building projects. The community garden movement of the 1970s and 1980s has been more valuable to US cities in more ways than are immediately apparent. It has allowed community groups continue to form around a simple, easily understandable, and relatively 'neutral' project politically. Sometimes the resulting organizations are able to go on to more ambitious projects which may have more basic importance to their lives, such as creating daycare centres or self-help housing.



FOUNDATION ROI BAUDOIN

Street art projects can be located anywhere along the entire continuum of the 'Ladder of Participation'. Commonly they fall on a low rung: artists design wall murals and children carry out the painting. Occasionally, however, teenagers produce large murals themselves. If the teens informed the owner or residents of the project, and yet initiated and managed the mural entirely themselves, then this would belong on the top rung of the ladder.



Building a den or tree house can be a valuable way for children to express their common interests to one another, and thereby help them forge a sense of group or community. Adults who wish to convince children or teenagers that a programme is designed for them might think, as a first step, of allowing young people to redesign and transform the place where they meet.

## POLITICAL SELF DETERMINATION

I have noted earlier in this Essay that schools are more likely to be concerned with political indoctrination, rather than with the kind of critical debate which allows children to establish their own beliefs. Democratic theory requires that citizens be allowed to consider changing their form of government, but there is little or no recognition of this principle in school curricula. Even with nations which loudly proclaim their democratic principles, little is done in the schools beyond presenting children with a history of the struggle by which their government was originally formed. Consent to the political system is manufactured, rather than springing spontaneously from critically self conscious individuals. The reason given for political indoctrination in schools is its necessity for establishing a stable, democratic form of government through the creation of a patriotic citizenry. In fact, by offering a fixed set of beliefs, rather than the opportunity for political self determination, the state is failing to prepare young people to join democratically with others in the kind of flexible response to a changing world that is ultimately necessary for genuine stability.

Participation is an important antidote to traditional educational practice which runs the risk of leaving youth alienated and open to manipulation. Through genuine participation in projects, which involve solutions to real problems, young people develop the skills of critical reflection and comparison of perspectives which are essential to the self-determination of political beliefs. The benefit is two-fold: to the self realization of the child and to the democratization of society.



## X. WHERE TO BEGIN

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Schools, as an integral part of the community, should be an obvious venue for fostering young people's understanding and experience of democratic participation. This has been argued forcefully by a number of great educational philosophers, but in practice it is rare. While there are fascinating experimental schools throughout the world, there is no nation where the practice of democratic participation in schools has been broadly adopted. The most fundamental reason seems to be that, as the primary socializing instrument of the state, schools are concerned with guaranteeing stability; and this is generally understood to mean preserving very conservative systems of authority. I have already noted that in democratic nations, like the USA, democracy is generally taught in an abstract and largely historical manner. The practice of democratic principles, even in the high schools (over 12 year old), is typically limited to the election of class representatives to sit on school councils, serving only in an advisory or consulting capacity. To most school administrators democracy in the schools means the collapse of rules and anarchy!

Whether in schools, youth clubs, or the family, successful discipline is not simply a question of more rules versus fewer rules, for all societies require children to understand and respect the need for rules. The important issue for the school as for the family, is the way that rules are made and enforced, or even whether or not they are made explicit to a child. Lawrence Kohlberg, who devoted much of his career to the problems of moral education in schools, concluded that the 'hidden curriculum' of authority in schools needs to be transformed into a curriculum of justice in which the rights of students as well as teachers are taken seriously. The value of justice should predominate over that of adult authority, and all issues of justice and authority should be dealt with through discussion. Without such a direct focus on issues of authority, it is likely that children will experience simulated democracy in the classroom while the traditional structure of teacher authority and autocratic governance in schools remains intact.

We must work with educational authorities to change their conception of schooling. Currently they fear too much the collapse of control which would result from practising democracy. While we work on this slow and difficult process, we must continue to work with non-governmental organizations which, throughout the world, have been providing most of the creative examples for effecting children's participation.

Ultimately, we need to reach the family as the primary setting for the development of children's sense of social responsibility and competence to participate. The family is more difficult to reach in any direct way. Parents can best be influenced by seeing examples of their children's competence. They should, therefore, always be drawn into school or community programmes of participation. This is unlikely to be achieved unless the parents themselves are given an opportunity to contribute. Programmes for children offer a special opportunity to break the cycle of adults' alienation from their own communities. If handled well, these programmes can allow children to be catalysts for change. We need joint community projects in which children and their elders offer to one another the special energies and perceptions of their generations. Productive collaboration between young and old should be the core of any democratic society wishing to improve itself, while providing continuity between the past, present, and the future.

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