Effective children's participation in social dialogue

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Children's involvement in participatory processes has been shown to have a positive effect on their personal development, and to benefit other children as well as adults. But people unfamiliar with children's participation may worry that it is something difficult to do, or that it will give children rights above those of their elders who should be recognised as the decision-makers in society. In fact, children have participated in consultations and decision-making for several decades in South Africa, and internationally.

This essay shows why children's participation in social dialogue matters to individuals, communities and society at large. Efforts to involve children equitably can go wrong, so the essay outlines what makes children's participation effective and flags some of the challenges. It responds to the following questions:

- What is children's participation in social dialogue?
- How widely is children's participation practised in South Africa?
- Why does children's participation matter?
- Why prioritise children's participation in resource-poor settings?
- What are the goals when committing to children's participation?
- What are the key challenges to effective children's participation?

What is children's participation in social dialogue?

Children's participation refers to the *active* involvement of children in conversations that inform decisions about their own lives and broader society. It goes beyond children being present, to asking those in charge to create opportunities for children to have influence. Children's participation rights are not imposed as a blanket over other considerations but are woven into a broader process of dialogue. And true dialogue lies at the core of children's participation because it requires two-way communication, where both parties are able to express themselves and to be heard.

In this publication, the term "social dialogue" refers to any interaction beyond the family or home, in which there is frequently a common goal. It includes collective processes in which children

work together and/or with adults to explore issues or make decisions that will affect a community, or even society as a whole. And it includes conversations between a child and a professional, such as a nurse, teacher or lawyer about the child's well-being – which may or may not involve the child's parents.

Children's partpation in service delivery ensures that individual children's needs are met. At the same time, meaningful conversations between a few individuals (children plus those supporting them) can be the starting point for broader processes of effective participation within a system of service delivery because the value of each contributor is recognised. At its core, children's participation in social dialogue is about creating effective working partnerships in which responsibilities and power are shared appropriately across age groups.

"A waste of time", is one response to these ideas – alongside "how could children contribute anything of greater value than adults?" Some might like the idea, but consider it an impossible dream: "How can an environment be created to make this happen?" The obstacles can feel overwhelming, but less so once you have read these essays.

There are two tasks involved in achieving two-way communication between children and adults. The first is to bolster children's abilities to express themselves in adult-dominated spheres. The second is to enable adults – both as individuals and collectively in organisations – to listen and respond to children. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comments 5 and 12 emphasise that children already communicate and should be presumed to have capacity to participate, meaning that it is up to adults to identify how to gather and interpret children's views. Experience from around the world shows that opening spaces for children in the minds and practices of adults can be tremendously challenging, yet ultimately very rewarding.[1]

How widely is children's participation practised in South Africa?

There is ample recognition of children's contribution to the struggle against apartheid, yet there are few channels for children to participate in democracy today.[2] Perhaps this stems from a "blindness" to the potential in children to join adults in creating a just society? Or perhaps adults fear an outburst of frustration from young people whose quality of life in the here and now is affected by poverty, a lack of services, and insecurity of tenure,[3] and whose dreams are largely unrealised[4]?

Undoubtedly, the inclusion of children in consultation and decision-making processes seems challenging when so many adults and children experience exclusion, violence and the denial of adequate food and housing due to chronic poverty and persistent large-scale unemployment.[5] But within this scenario children are already active in sustaining communities by caring for dependent or sick relatives,[6] assisting with farming or small businesses,[7] and maintaining links between scattered family[8].

Children also understand how their participation affects their lives both negatively and positively. Research with children who care for sick relatives in Tanzania[9] and Kenya[10] shows that children are aware of the time and emotional demands of this role, and the consequences for their school attendance and achievement. Children with similar domestic responsibilities in South Africa know that they can best ensure their own protection (and that of others close to them) if they contribute practically to care in the home[11] and add their insights to neighbourhood governance[12]. Acknowledging children's experience and engaging with their opinions is the springboard for collaborative partnerships across a spectrum of ages, abilities, cultures, and socio-economic realities.

The Constitution defines "childhood" as the period between birth and 18 years. Few doubt the capacities of teenagers to engage in social dialogue, and many have worked collaboratively with older children. But rarely are infants and young children considered ready to give input. Yet there is increasing evidence that the emotional intelligence of children under five years is vastly under-estimated,[13] and that their participation in decision-making is possible with an age-appropriate approach. There are now innumerable examples of highly effective participatory work done with infants and toddlers.[14]

Why does children's participation matter?

There are two reasons why children's participation is critical to a democratic society.

The first is that adults – in whatever nurturing and supporting role to children – need children's knowledge to do a proper job. Put simply, adults need to understand how children experience the world, and specifically services for children, in order to meet their needs better.

Secondly, children need their knowledge to count if they are going to flourish developmentally,[15] and need to understand the needs and desires of the broader community – both young and old[16]. It is about enabling young citizenship – the capacity to fulfil age-appropriate responsibilities – as well as preparing children to embrace citizenship as adults. Children's participation is much more than an adult duty. It has immediate benefits for both adults and children, and is a sound social and economic investment in the future.

At this point in South Africa's history, there is a pressing need for children to engage with adults on the principles and practices being put into place to create a just and equal society. As Archbishop Tutu says in the *Foreword* (p. 6), children's desire

for more and better information about their own worlds, and those of their peers with different histories, reflects a hunger for dialogue and involvement with the community that – when met – offers enormous contributions to society. One reason why services fall short in South Africa is the lack of demand for quality or quantity from people of all ages.[17] It is only through social dialogue across the generations that an awareness of entitlement will grow, and with this a demand for services that holds government accountable.

Why prioritise children's participation in resource-poor settings?

Although there has been a significant decline in child poverty in recent years (largely due to the expansion of social grants), the reality is that 61%[18] of South Africa's children live in households below the income poverty line[i]. This lack of adult income in the home compromises many children's access to basic services, adequate food, water, sanitation and housing. In fact, children are disproportionately affected by unemployment: Nearly one in four economically active adults are unemployed,[19] yet more than a third of children (36%) live in households without an employed adult[20].

Planners and policy-makers can easily overlook the conditions children face unless child-centred statistics are used. For example, having deduced that 71% of households have basic sanitation,[ii] a second calculation is needed to demonstrate the impact on children: Only 63% of *children* live in households with basic sanitation.[21]

Government decision-makers and service providers cannot provide better services unless they understand children's experiences of poverty. Therefore the realisation of children's socio-economic rights is dependent on first realising their civil and political rights (to be fairly represented and properly researched).

Given the realities of poverty, some may feel that fulfilling children's basic needs must make first claim on scarce resources, and that their participation in social dialogue is an unaffordable luxury. But a child-centred, consultative approach to children's experiences of poverty is necessary to build an accurate picture,[22] thereby doing justice to the constitutional principle that prioritises the "best interests of the child"[23].

Just as poor people should have a say in how best to deal with poverty, so too should children have a say in how budgets and government programmes should tackle the consequences of poverty in their lives. In remote rural settings children are often marginalised by the daily demands of agriculture and rural survival, as well as cultural traditions guiding relationships between generations. Children may be excluded from the very decision-making processes in which they could offer practical solutions based on their own experiences.[24]

The demands on children are changing as adults struggling to cope with income poverty also face HIV-related illness that is often both physically and mentally debilitating.[25] As elsewhere in southern Africa, children are playing increasingly complex, multiple roles as they try to meet their own physical, social and emotional needs, plus those of their siblings and often their adult family members.[26] Evidence shows that children's participation in everyday decision-making and service design becomes all the more important in bolstering their abilities to cope with being a learner, carer and/or breadwinner in a constantly changing environment.[27] In addition, fulfilling multiple roles in the home and community creates particular restrictions on the types of service children are able to access, and benefit from.[28] Without seeking children's input on design, service providers will miss the mark.

A further reason to prioritise participatory approaches in resource-poor settings is their psychological benefits. Children facing poverty-related insecurities hold on to the sense that they, or their adult carers, are in control of their lives as a way of coping with uncertainty. But coping in this way is not sustainable because so many factors are outside their control.[29] Psychologists have found that people cope better with uncertainty when their opinions and experiences are heard, and acted on, because such responses bolster self-esteem, sustain hope and can create networks for accessing support.

What are the goals when committing to children's participation?

Many feel daunted at the prospect of putting children's participation principles into practice. The image of a "participatory process" is often far grander and more complicated than it needs to be. As other essays testify, simple steps and small changes can have big results. And most importantly, participation must always be a process that is allowed to evolve and grow at a pace, and in directions, that are comfortable to both children and adults. There are therefore no prescriptions as to how to enable children's participation in social dialogue. In this context, it is helpful to lay out some core principles and practices that enable children's effective participation in social dialogue before learning from the challenges and tripping-points encountered by others.

There would be no point in inviting children to participate in dialogue on a new policy, the design of a programme, or the assessment of a service, if there was no intention to use their experience and opinions strategically to inform change. The goal, at its simplest, is to ensure that accurate, relevant knowledge

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i   Children in households with monthly per capita income below R552 in 2009.
ii Basic sanitation includes flush toilets and ventilated pit latrines that dispose of waste safely and are within or near a house.

informs planning and that learning persists throughout the process – from initial planning through to implementation, evaluation and revised design (see figure 2 on p. 50). Such a cycle guides the work of most organisations and the only extra step is to find appropriate ways to ensure that children are included throughout this process. There are many ways to go about this.

Four broad principles underlie effective children's participation:
1. Acknowledge that acting in "the best interests of the child" first requires listening to children.
2. Fulfil specific constitutional and international rights (see the essay on children's rights on pp. 22 – 29).
3. Promote human dignity – do no harm and avoid discrimination on the basis of age, ability, wealth, religion, etc.
4. Build democratic citizenship in a way that respects and celebrates cultural diversity, as an end in itself and as a model for others.

These principles set the tone for relationships between children and adults, as well as amongst children themselves. They require dynamic, respectful relationships in which communication is experienced as two-way by both parties. In other words, the opinions of all participants are valued and heard because each person – regardless of age – has experience that others cannot bring to the table. "Hearing" does not just pay lip-service to the experience. Rather, those listening in a participatory process have – by definition – committed to do more than hear what children say. They have committed to bringing that knowledge to bear in decisions, and to ensure dignity and equality in the relationship.

What are the key challenges to effective children's participation?

The concept of children's participation is not new in South Africa. The principles of dialogue with, and inclusion of, children are well supported, and there is a sprinkling of successful children's participation initiatives in policy reform,[30] research[31] and advocacy[32]. Why then is a more general inclusion of participatory processes slow to gain traction?

For most adults, working with children in a participatory way involves changing the way in which they see children. Some have called this a "head change and a heart change".[33] Such a profound shift in thinking is needed even for those who interact daily with children at work or in leisure time because adults' perceptions of children – particularly very young ones – are so deeply embedded that they are not even conscious of their existence. Most people find that it is only when they start to work in a participatory manner with children that they can see their own biases and assumptions.[34] At this point it is possible to make

Drama: Role-playing a meeting with the Minister of Education

the small but critical shift that legitimises children's contributions in adults' minds and illuminates ways of channelling these into working practices.

Barriers to translating enthusiasm for children's participation into effective processes include:

- *Uncertainty about institutional changes, for example whether an entirely new approach is required, or just a slight adjustment:* In planning any participatory process, it is vital to ask some tough questions about organisational practice: What measures already exist to ensure two-way, respectful communication between adults and children, and the honouring of adult commitments to listen to children and act accordingly? The larger the gaps, the greater the shift in approach required.

- *Potential extra costs involved and uncertainty about who should pay:* If children's participation is an integral, transformative process and not just an "added extra", there will be initial costs in terms of human resources to set processes in motion. Government and donor organisations can support such integrated participation by allocating appropriate funds and timeframes for delivery. Encouragingly, there is growing evidence from other countries that children's participation can be embedded into everyday practices with minimal costs or disruption,[35] for example through the regular documentation of dialogue with children by service providers.

- *Children are rarely present or consulted at the very start of participatory initiatives:* The result of this pattern is that children remain relatively powerless in the bigger decisions about the purpose and intended outcomes of the exercise. Initiatives that intend to

be participatory can run aground when children recognise that the overall beneficiary of the time and money spent was the organisation running the process, rather than the planned outcome (such as a better policy, or improved service).

- *Staff not having the skills for two-way communication or collaborative action with children:*
  Any process that is framed in participatory language inevitably raises expectations amongst those agreeing to take part. If these cannot be met and there is no response from adults to the input children provide, then children quickly see how tokenistic their involvement is, and they lose trust in the process, people and organisation. An initiative that started out as "participatory" ends up working against the principles of democracy that participation is meant to embody. Adults must have the skills to engage in real dialogue and learning for the process to maintain its integrity. Young people are quick to spot a mismatch between words and action!

- *Poor understanding of the ethical considerations and provision needed:*
  The ethical issues at stake are actually quite simple, and there are many useful guidelines available (see list of recommended resources on p. 73). At its core, an ethical approach to children's participation in social dialogue must strike the balance between protection and enabling true participation. Protective steps (such as ensuring confidentiality and guarding against the abuse of power by adults) are needed to minimise the potential for harm. But of equal importance are the often-neglected steps to ensure that children have access to relevant information, and to environments where they can form opinions and express these in a climate of listening and respect.[36] Sometimes, well-meaning concerns to protect children can have the unintended consequence of stifling their rights to freedom of association and expression.

- *Anxiety about "getting it wrong":*
  Many initiatives are called "participatory" but turn out to be decorative and tokenistic at best, and manipulative at worst. Projects that gather a group of children and pull them into an event are highly attractive because they are easy to run, relatively cheap, draw attention to an organisation as "caring" and "progressive", and have an initial high impact as children get up and speak. Yet there are real dangers in inviting children in, but not letting them come too close. At the extreme end, children are included only as performers or as puppets who "speak" the pre-defined rhetoric or simply do as they are told. These initiatives fly in the face of participatory rights, because they exclude children from any meaningful dialogue or decision-making and simply use children for

adults' benefit. Initiatives that are envisioned as participatory can easily follow this pattern, and organisations must be vigilant to avoid this trap.

Underlying these challenges are factors that stem in part from South Africa's history of discrimination and disenfranchisement. Psychologists point out that a basic level of self-esteem is required within people, whether adults or children, in order for effective and open dialogue to take place. The apartheid state consciously and consistently undermined people's self-worth, and this legacy is slow to fade. Participatory processes with children can be compromised when adult facilitators do not feel valued in their working role.

In addition, adults working with children often reconnect with internal wounds from their own childhood.[37] At varying levels, there is a need for support and healing before adults are ready to listen to children and work effectively with what they bring to the dialogue. Even everyday conversations in ordinary settings like schools and clinics are affected by this hidden reality. For example, nurses who have no experience of being listened to are much less likely to talk to children in a way that seeks their opinions.

Conclusion

The practical and ethical justifications for children's participation are rooted in the fact that acting in "the best interests of the child" first requires learning from children about their lives. Without such knowledge, plans to improve children's lives – whether through services, policy change or advocacy – will fall short.

The mechanics of putting participatory processes in motion are described in the essays that follow, as are both the intended and unexpected benefits for children and adults alike. Adults who create opportunities to engage with children in social dialogue are often surprised by the depth of insight, empathy and mutual reward in their interactions. Making children's participation work for everyone requires a sensitive approach and careful preparation. Examples of these are found in the essays that follow.

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