

## Children and Young People Participating in PRSP Processes

Lessons from Save the Children's experiences

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have become key defining documents for economic and social policy in low-income countries since they were introduced five years ago. When they work well, PRSPs have the potential to enable civil society organisations to influence government policy in tackling poverty.

Many children and young people have first-hand experience of poverty. Their experiences are crucial in understanding how poverty affects families at household levels, including decisions about education and the allocation of scarce resources such as money or food. As an important part of civil society, they should be involved in developing PRSPs.

This paper outlines Save the Children's experience in facilitating children and young people's participation in PRSP processes. It explores the difficulties and challenges of involving children, and argues that children and young people can make a significant contribution to developing effective strategies to tackle poverty within PRSP processes.

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Kate O'Malley

**Save the Children UK is a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, the world's leading independent children's rights organisation, with members in 29 countries and operational programmes in more than 100.**

**Save the Children works with children and their communities to provide practical assistance and, by influencing policy and public opinion, bring about positive change for children.**

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## Abbreviations

DFID	Department for International Development
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Country
IFI	International Financial Institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

## Overview

In the five years since their introduction by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have become key defining documents for economic and social policy in around 40 low-income countries. It would be difficult to pinpoint any other policy document and planning process with the potential to have such a pervasive effect on children's lives in so many countries.

The terms of PRSP processes require that civil society be consulted in their formulation. This presents a major, potentially ground-breaking, opportunity for civil society organisations to try to influence government strategy and policy to tackle poverty. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the world's most widely ratified treaty, sets out the right of children and young people to express their views on decisions that affect them. Children and young people are an important group within civil society affected by poverty, and accordingly, Save the Children promotes their rights to be involved in PRSP processes.

Children and young people's participation in the development of PRSPs is a right which should benefit them; but it can also improve official decision-making. Children and young people provide a unique view of the impact of poverty on families. They often voice truths that adults no longer notice, or which socialised adults are wary of expressing, such as the link between poverty and family violence or substance abuse. Children's experiences are crucial in understanding how poverty affects families at household levels, including decisions about education and the allocation of scarce resources such as money or food.

Children and young people's involvement in PRSPs can include: *contributing to policy dialogue* (doing research, providing information, expressing views, lobbying on the content), *contributing to implementation* (involvement in community-level implementation projects) and *monitoring and evaluation* (assessing whether budgets are getting through to local level, evaluating achievements). They can participate at *various levels*: in small-scale local community forums, by representation at district or regional initiatives, and at national-level consultations or representation at meetings. The timescale of their involvement can vary from participation in one-off research consultations through to sustained participation over several years.

Because of the technical nature of PRSPs, and the fact that children and young people's participation is only at a fledgling stage, most participatory initiatives have centred on large-scale consultations to gather views and experiences. This is a step forward, but it does not involve children and young people taking the lead in decision-making around the advocacy process. Nevertheless, these consultative initiatives are a good start, and have broken new ground in some countries in recognising children and young people's experiences and their ability to provide valuable insights to inform policy-making on poverty.

This paper summarises Save the Children UK's experience in facilitating children and young people's participation in PRSP processes, highlighting in particular

the experiences of Vietnam and Honduras, and drawing on insights from Lesotho, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the work of a Guyanese NGO. It discusses the effectiveness of a range of approaches, highlights challenges, outlines learning points and raises questions about the impact and cost-benefit trade-off of children and young people's participation in PRSPs.

While promoting the right of children and young people to be involved in PRSP processes, it is important to be realistic. Civil society participation in PRSPs is still in its early stages, and groups in many countries are still pushing to overcome the resistance of decision-makers and enforce their right to be involved. For marginalised children and young people, the struggle is even greater. Not only do they have to convince decision-makers of the relevance of their views, they may also have to raise awareness within civil society of the worth of their contributions.

Even if children and young people do have opportunities to take part in PRSP processes, it is worth questioning what might be achieved by their involvement. Are children and young people's insights into poverty likely to make a difference to PRSP policy-making? Or is participation a time- and resource-consuming process that is likely to change little? Could their involvement only end up lending undeserved legitimacy to PRSPs? Some critics argue that PRSPs the world over reinforce the economic policies of the World Bank and IMF, and there is little room for independent thinking.

The same questions about the benefits of participation could be asked of adult civil society participation in PRSPs. But children and young people embarking on citizenship activities for the first time may be particularly vulnerable to having their expectations raised unrealistically. Studies on children and young people's participation have shown that when their views are ignored by adults, this can decrease their self-esteem and stop them getting involved again.

None of these cautions should be taken as a case for advising against encouraging children and young people's participation in PRSP processes. Instead, they are intended to prompt discussion about better ways to ensure that participation in PRSPs empowers children and young people and influences poverty planning and action.

Save the Children believes that decisions about involvement in PRSPs are best made by children and young people themselves. But in most cases, their involvement is facilitated by adults, who need to balance their presentation of opportunities with outlining the challenges. Decisions about involvement will depend on the local context – the opportunities, the resources, timeframes, the children and young people's concerns and the readiness of decision-makers to consider children and young people's perspectives.

In general, Save the Children believes that although children and young people's participation in PRSPs is still at an embryonic stage, there have been some successes where children and young people's views have influenced policy-makers. There are some positive experiences that suggest PRSP participation could be part of a long-term process of influencing official thinking and promoting receptivity towards children and young people's input.

In **Vietnam**, Save the Children has organised three large-scale consultations in Ho Chi Minh City involving over 400 children and young people contributing to national poverty planning or monitoring. The consultations spanned the full PRSP cycle: from pre-PRSP development planning, to getting feedback on the interim and draft PRSP, to a review of progress in implementing the country's first PRSP. Children and young people in Vietnam highlighted the plight of the growing number of migrant families in the capital who are not registered by the authorities and who have major problems accessing healthcare, education and social welfare services. Their information helped change procedures to allow unregistered migrants access to services more quickly. This was a major step forward in a city where up to a third of the population of some wards are 'hidden' unregistered migrants. The consultations also resulted in two local government initiatives to involve children and young people in official processes.

In **Honduras**, Save the Children has facilitated, together with its local partner organisations, five consultations with children and young people that have shaped Save the Children's advocacy on Honduras's PRSP. In the largest of the consultations, involving 3,000 children across the country, children and young people's experiences and viewpoints on child labour were sought. The results convinced government officials to prioritise child poverty in the PRSP and include targets within it on reducing child labour. A commitment was also secured to use funds released by fulfilment of the PRSP to fund education initiatives for child workers. Children and young people's views contributed to more joined-up policy-making, with child labour policies linked to poverty reduction strategies.

In both these countries, children and young people have highlighted the social impact of poverty – on family conflict, break-up, violence, drug abuse and the growth of gang culture. They have sounded important warning bells about the long-term impact of poverty, and the negative way it will shape communities around the world if it is not addressed urgently. Children and young people's participation has also highlighted the price children pay for poverty in terms of the damage to their psychological health and outlook for the future. Signalling these problems and building an understanding of them is an important step in achieving social change.

This paper seeks to draw lessons from Save the Children's experience of facilitating participation in PRSPs, linked to the experience of children and young people's participation in policy-making generally about what contributes to effective participation. These include:

- **Children and young people need to be well informed** about the opportunities for influencing PRSPs, the challenges, the process, its aims, their role, the time required, the channels of decision-making and the context of PRSPs. Child-friendly versions of the PRSP may need to be produced using appropriate language and concepts.
- **Effective participation takes considerable time.** For people not used to reading official documents, rushed consultations do not allow time to contribute, and mitigate against efforts to ensure the most marginalised



children are involved. Planning to meet official deadlines needs to take account of times when children and young people are busy – the school year, harvest time, work schedules.

- **Feedback needs to be given.** It can be too easy for children's input into official PRSP processes to get 'lost' in bureaucratic processes. Then feedback to children gets neglected because of lack of clarity about the outcome.
- **The most marginalised children need to be included.** Children most affected by poverty need to be given an opportunity for involvement. This may require extra time and resources, for example, to communicate with children in remote rural areas or to facilitate the involvement of disabled children. Organisations facilitating children and young people's involvement need to avoid grooming an elite group of professional child spokespeople.
- **Consideration needs to be given to compensating children for the cost of their involvement.** This may involve financial compensation for children who would normally be working, provision of educational material if children miss out on school, paying transport fares and providing snacks.
- **It is important to work with adults too.** Giving children and young people a voice will only work if adults are willing to listen. Decision-makers should be lobbied to make sure children and young people's input is given the recognition it deserves. Parents, teachers and employers need to be informed and educated.
- **Partnerships need to be developed to share expertise.** International organisations should work with indigenous civil society organisations, or local officials, on participatory initiatives to increase their access to PRSP decision-making processes, rather than undercutting their role.

# 1 Introduction

In 1999 the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) introduced a new process for low-income countries requesting debt relief from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative or those seeking low-interest IMF and World Bank loans. To qualify for assistance, governments had to produce a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) setting out their strategies to combat poverty, aligned to national social and economic plans, including detailed measures sector by sector. In the five years since its inception, the PRSP has become a defining document for economic and social policy in around 40 countries.\*

The process of producing a strategy can provide significant new opportunities for influencing policy to improve the lives of poor children and their families. For the first time, governments are required to undertake a publicly accessible analysis of poverty in their country – acknowledging the extent of poverty, who is affected and the reasons behind poverty. They must outline ways poverty will be tackled. This requires governments to formulate a coherent plan, linking economic policy and governance measures with new or existing sectoral plans, for example, in education and health, to reduce poverty.

Explicit in PRSP processes is a requirement that governments involve civil society in their formulation. While the extent of civil society involvement or consultation is open to local interpretation, and often it is the World Bank and IMF that are pushing reluctant governments to consult civil society, the requirement for civil society involvement is nevertheless a significant step forward. It provides opportunities for NGOs and civil society to insist on their right to be involved, and opens the door for citizens to influence policies on poverty. In practice, civil society has had to push hard for admission into the process, but it now has a foot in the door in many countries. As the effectiveness of civil society participation is demonstrated, a number of governments are becoming more open to the idea. Citizens' and NGOs' involvement in PRSP process is increasing over time, with many donor countries providing funding for civil society participation. Nevertheless, concerns remain about the extent to which civil society input genuinely makes a difference to policy, and how far it is simply an exercise in lending PRSPs a veneer of legitimacy.

About 15 of Save the Children UK's programmes have engaged with PRSP processes since 1999, with eight dedicating substantial staff time and resources to this work. Their involvement has included:

- contributing to PRSP formulation through involvement in sectoral committees inputting into strategy, feeding in research and analysis from experience on specific issues or on the realities of household livelihoods
- undertaking or facilitating consultations with civil society groups, including children and young people, to input their experiences, views and ideas

\*According to the latest figures on the IMF's website, by March 2004, 39 countries had produced PRSPs and many more countries had produced interim PRSPs.

- monitoring the implementation of measures set out in the PRSP, monitoring budget allocations and the impact of promised resources in local settings, and monitoring the extent of changes in people's lives through mechanisms such as participatory poverty assessments.

There is now considerable learning in the NGO community and civil society generally about how adult civil society can engage with PRSP processes. But there is much less knowledge about how children and young people can engage meaningfully with PRSPs, the most effective methods of doing this, pitfalls to avoid, and what can be achieved for children and young people more widely. The whole of civil society, including marginalised groups, should be able to input into PRSP processes. Part of this involves developing mechanisms and strategies to make sure children and young people can participate.

This paper is part of that learning process. It seeks to summarise Save the Children's experience and learning so far, to look at further opportunities for children and young people to engage in the PRSP process and to suggest ways of taking this way forward. It is also designed to contribute to a dialogue with other NGOs and civil society organisations on effective and meaningful ways of involving children and young people or other marginalised sectors of civil society in PRSP processes.

Since its establishment in 1919, Save the Children has emphasised tackling poverty through practical action and policy dialogue as a key to reducing child and family poverty. In the last decade the organisation has increasingly stressed the need for community-level initiatives to be linked to national and international advocacy – in order to improve the lives of millions more children than its on-the-ground work can reach. This increasing emphasis on advocacy has entailed Save the Children engaging with national and international policy processes on issues including anti-poverty policy, education, child labour and trade liberalisation.

Underpinning all Save the Children's work is its orientation as a child rights organisation. Save the Children identifies authorities who are responsible for fulfilling children's rights, and works with children and young people to ensure these authorities meet their obligations. Above all, Save the Children promotes children and young people's right to have a say on decisions that affect them, as enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Save the Children recognises that children and young people are an important group within civil society affected by poverty, and advocates their right to be involved in the PRSP process. As well as advocating for the realisation of this principle, Save the Children is also working directly to involve children and young people in the PRSP process in a number of countries.

## 2 Children and young people's participation

The last 15 years have seen the start of a fundamental shift in official attitudes towards children. From being viewed as weaker members of society in need of adult guidance and protection, children have begun to be viewed as citizens with rights, and as people who can act to secure these rights themselves.

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) both marks and promotes this emerging attitude towards children as younger human beings with rights and abilities. Now the world's most widely ratified international treaty – having been adopted into national law by every country in the world except Somalia and the United States – the UNCRC formalises children's rights to education, healthcare, an adequate standard of living and protection from exploitation. The UNCRC also introduces a new, significant dimension – children's right to have a voice and be listened to.

The hub of this changing attitude to children is Article 12 of the UNCRC: *“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...”* Other articles set out children's rights to freedom of expression (Article 13); conscience, thought and religion (Article 14); association (Article 15); to information (Article 17); and their right to education that promotes human rights and democracy (Article 29).

The shift in society's view of children has been uneven. Some organisations, such as children and young people's organisations and NGOs, have readily embraced the idea of children and young people as citizens with rights, and promoted public awareness of it. Change has been slower among policy-makers, who may use the rhetoric of rights but still confine their thinking to children's needs for basic services. However, change is underway, and decision-makers in countries which have ratified the UNCRC are being forced to adapt their thinking and practice.

### 2.1 Definition of participation

Participation has become shorthand for a huge range of activities that involve children and young people in some form of decision-making. A useful definition of participation has been articulated by O'Kane. Participation, according to O'Kane, is: *“an ongoing process of children's active involvement in decision-making (at different levels) in matters that concern them. It requires information sharing and dialogue between children and adults, which is based on mutual respect and power sharing. Genuine participation gives children the power to shape both the process and outcome.”* (cited by Williams, 2004)

Kabeer (quoted in Williams, 2004) puts participation in the framework of empowering marginalised groups, defining it as: *“the processes of change through which those who have been denied the ability to articulate their needs,*

*exercise those rights and influence the decision-making processes which shape their lives, are enabled to do so”.*

There are a variety of ways children and young people can participate in decision-making. These include:

- research, analysis and policy development
- project design, involvement in managing projects or institutions
- peer representation, participating in conferences; advocacy, campaigning, lobbying; publicity and media work
- monitoring decisions, evaluating services.

New forms of participation are evolving all the time as experience in this field grows. These include participatory techniques, such as community mapping and wealth ranking, and the use of the creative arts such as visual art and drama.

A useful working categorisation of participation is articulated by Lansdown (2001), who groups initiatives into three main levels, described below.

- **Consultative processes** are when adults seek to find out children and young people’s experiences, views or concerns in order to improve legislation, policies or services. These involve a recognition by adults with power of the importance of children’s experience. Often they provide children and young people with opportunities for organising together and acquiring skills and confidence in expressing their views. They can also result in greater accountability of decision-makers on the need to address children and young people’s concerns, and they can lead on to involving children further in designing interventions or providing ongoing input into decision-making. However, at their simplest – eg, a one-off consultation – they are adult-led and managed and do not give children any control over the outcomes.
- **Participative initiatives** are when adults actively involve children and young people in projects, research or services. Although the work is initiated by adults, it does involve some sharing of power between adults and children or young people. By their active involvement, children and young people have more direct input into the shape of the initiative, and can influence the outcome. It builds their skills, provides them with greater access to information and gives them opportunities to organise together, which can result in children and young people taking over the running of the project or setting up a follow-up initiative themselves.
- **Self-advocacy** is a process of empowering children and young people themselves to take action on issues they identify. The process is controlled by children and young people. The role of the adults is to facilitate young people’s leadership and provide support, perhaps as advisers, mentors or fundraisers.

Although these are three useful grades of participation, they are not mutually exclusive categories. Projects may start off with consultation, move to a participative partnership where action is taken in collaboration, and the outcome

might be a self-advocacy initiative. Children and young people may be ready for different types of participation depending on their stage of involvement, skills or maturity. Each category of involvement has its purposes and is appropriate to different settings.

## 2.2 The benefits of participation

The case for involving children and young people in policy-making has been well articulated in the wake of the formalisation of the UNCRC. At the centre is the principle that, like all people, children and young people have a fundamental human right to express their views on decisions that affect them. Through participation in decision-making children learn what it is to have their rights respected, and find out the importance of respecting others' rights, and ultimately how their freedom is balanced by the rights of others.

Involvement at a young age in society's decision-making processes enhances democracy in general. *"It is through learning to question, to express views and having their opinions taken seriously, that children will acquire the skills and competence to develop their thinking and to exercise judgement in the myriad of issues that will confront them as they approach adulthood,"* the former director of the UK's Children's Rights Office, Gerison Lansdown (2001) argues. It is unrealistic to expect young people suddenly to have the knowledge and skills to become active citizens when they reach the age when they can vote or participate in democratic forums without any previous exposure to the processes and experiences involved.

Encouraging children and young people to speak up is also likely to improve child protection and fulfilment of other children's rights. When children and young people themselves are familiar with expressing their ideas and using the mechanisms available, abuse and violation of rights can be more easily exposed and rectified.

Children and young people's experiences and views can contribute to better decisions, based on the reality of children and young people's lives, not untested adult assumptions. For example, in countries trying to improve the level of school attendance, children are the best people to explain why they do not attend school and what measures would encourage them to attend. If young people's views are not canvassed, decision-making on issues that impact directly on them is flawed and based on incomplete information.

Children and young people have different perspectives from adults and may provide important information; for example, on the effects of poverty at family-level, or the connection between poverty and young people's aspirations. Children and young people may also be more readily able to disclose truths than adults who have been socialised into tailoring their views to fit accepted norms.

A major benefit of child participation is an increase in the confidence and skills of the children and young people involved. A UK study (Kirby, 2002) into a range of participatory initiatives found substantial evidence that participation



benefits young people. If done properly, and if their views are really listened to, participation improves young people's confidence, knowledge, skills and motivation. Kirby's study, which looked at evaluations of five separate participatory initiatives found: *"Taking part in decisions can help to make young people feel that their views are important, that they are listened to and can change things in their lives and their communities."* Two studies cited in this research even showed that participation could improve young people's educational attainment.

Participation can also break down discrimination between groups of young people, particularly if they may not have come into contact before – such as able-bodied and disabled young people or those from different ethnic groups or communities such as asylum-seekers. Participation does not only improve the lives of the young people directly involved. When done well, it can enhance community relations by improving dialogue between young people and adults, including parents, other residents, businesses and professionals.

### 2.3 Potential difficulties

Participation of children and young people in policy discussion is usually the result of some degree of adult mediation. This puts particular responsibility on the intermediary adults or organisations to ensure that children and young people's participation occurs with their informed consent and is in their best interests.

Once this challenge has been overcome, there may still be difficulties.

- Participation can have a negative effect if children and young people's expectations are raised unrealistically and they later find out that their views are ignored. Kirby's study (2002) of UK participatory projects found that when young people's input appears to achieve very little, involvement can decrease their self-esteem and make them less likely to want to participate in future projects. This can happen if the issue is one in which children and young people's participation is unlikely to result in concrete changes, or when adults or organisations are simply promoting participation to enhance their own image but are not interested in really empowering children and young people.
- Another risk of ill-thought-out participation is that it can co-opt children and young people into time-consuming processes and waste their energy and enthusiasm.
- Even worse, when entered into without adequate forethought or in a tokenistic way, children and young people's participation can give legitimacy to flawed adult decision-making.
- Also, if done badly, in ways that are not sensitive to the children and young people taking part and the requirements of the process concerned, it can harden policy-makers' attitudes against children and young people's participation.

- If participation is not representative of the diverse range of children and young people affected by an issue, 'participation' by a few can result in the creation of an elite and the further marginalisation of many children.

## 2.4 Participation in practice

So, what is good participation? Lansdown (2001) provides a useful outline of the ingredients for effective participation by children and young people, which can be summarised as follows.

- **Participation must be informed.** Children and young people need to understand what the project or process is about, its aims and their role in it. Decision-making processes also need to be made clear. Information must be provided in accessible formats appropriate to their age.
- **Participation must be voluntary.** Children and young people must be able to choose to get involved, and be allowed to leave at any stage.
- **The issue must be relevant to children and young people themselves.** Children and young people's interest may not be sustained if the issue does not seem relevant to their day-to-day lives.
- **Children and young people's input must have the capacity to change things.** There is little point in consulting children or young people over decisions or proposals which they cannot influence.
- **Children and young people's views and input must be respected.** All contributions from children and young people should be valued, although children and young people of different ages and abilities will require different levels of support and will contribute in different ways.
- **Ground rules need to be established.** Rules governing the way the group or project works need to be negotiated between children and young people and adults at the beginning. Adults may need to make clear any boundaries that they are imposing, eg, about behaviour.
- **Children and young people should be involved from the earliest possible stage.** The earlier they are involved, the more likely their input will have real impact in shaping its direction.
- **Children and young people's priorities need to be taken into account.** Adults need to listen to children and young people's ideas right through the course of the project and be prepared to have their assumptions challenged, and to adapt and change things.
- **Children and young people's diverse experiences need to be taken into account.** Efforts should be made to ensure that all children and young people who have a legitimate interest in the project are considered for inclusion in it, including those who are usually marginalised.
- **Resources need to be allocated.** Time and staff support needs to be planned and allocated so that participation is meaningful.



- **It is important to work with adults too.** Giving children and young people a voice will only work if adults are willing to listen. Decision-makers should be lobbied to make sure children and young people's input is given the recognition it deserves. Work also needs to take place to inform and educate parents, teachers and employers.

In addition, child protection measures need to be put in place, to minimise the risk of abuse or exploitation when children and young people are taking part in participatory processes.

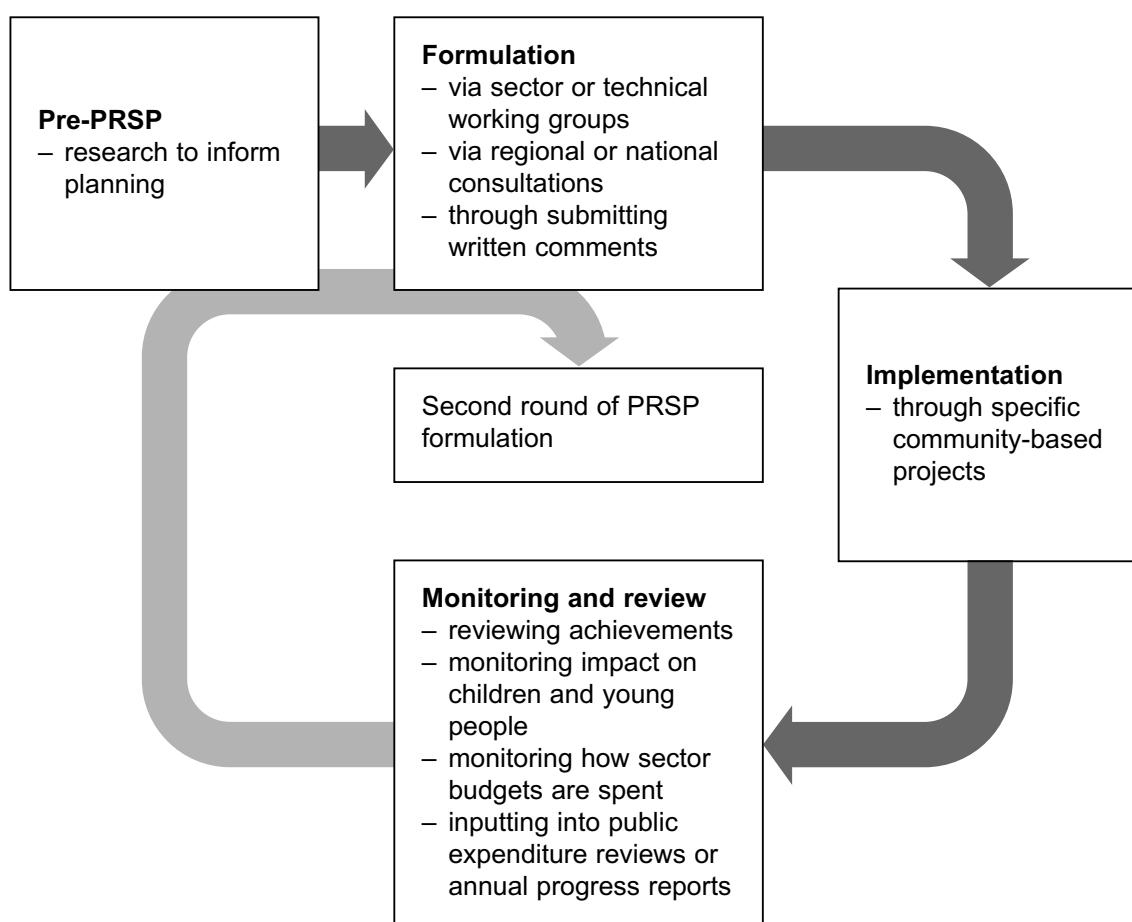
Organisations promoting child participation need to also consider other calls on children's time and consider what children and young people might have to give up in order to participate. For example, child workers might be losing vital income by taking part in a participatory workshop. Consideration may need to be given to compensating such children for the time they give to a project. (This is discussed more in Chapter 4.)

These general principles on participation may be useful in considering the choices involved in facilitating children and young people's involvement in PRSP processes, and in trying to ensure that it is a meaningful experience for everyone concerned. The next section explores in more detail the opportunities and constraints on children and young people's involvement in PRSP processes.

### 3 The challenges of children and young people's participation in the context of PRSPs

In theory, PRSPs provide a space which can facilitate children and young people's participation in national policy-making processes. Children and young people's voices could reach the most influential decision-makers in their country.

Children and young people's involvement can include: **contributing to policy dialogue** (doing research, providing information, expressing views, lobbying on the content), **contributing to implementation** (involvement in community-level implementation projects) and **monitoring and evaluation** (assessing whether budgets are getting through to local level, evaluating achievements). They can participate at various levels: from small-scale local community forums, to representation at district or regional initiatives, through to national-level consultations or representation at meetings. The timescale of their involvement can vary from participation in one-off research consultations through to sustained participation over several years.



*Figure 1 indicates the different stages of the PRSP process with opportunities for children and young people's involvement.*

### 3.1 Power relations

A number of factors particular to PRSPs mean that children and young people's participation has been limited to date. The purpose of this paper is not to elaborate the problems or critique PRSPs, but to look at how their existing mechanisms can be used to facilitate children's and young people's influence on economic and social policy.

First, it needs to be acknowledged that the power dynamics behind PRSPs are weighted against children and young people. PRSPs are controlled by some of the most powerful adults in the world. Even national governments' power in the PRSP process is limited. International Financial Institutions (IFIs) initiated the framework for PRSPs and have the power to approve or reject them. The World Bank, IMF and donor governments also provide substantial 'technical' advice in the form of advisers, which critics argue result in the same economic policies being reinforced in PRSPs the world over, albeit with a national 'face' (Craig, and Porter, 2002).

Countries producing or implementing PRSPs are some of the world's poorest and lack influence to change international economic policies. Ordinary citizens within these countries, particularly poor and marginalised people, have little power to influence their own governments, let alone the IFIs. And at the bottom of the chain of influence are poor and marginalised children and young people, who have even less leverage and few forums for making their voices heard.

Civil society involvement is promoted by the World Bank, the IMF and other donors as a key planning principle of PRSP. In practice, the participation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or individuals of any age has been limited, not least because some governments question the requirement for an elected government to engage in additional forms of consultative policy-making. Civil society organisations in many PRSP countries are clamouring for more opportunities for involvement in PRSP processes, and not necessarily succeeding, which means that achieving 'space' for children and young people to input their views may be even more difficult. Inevitably, participation in PRSP processes has principally taken the form of giving information or suggestions, rather than a more genuine sharing of power.

But while acknowledging those limitations, it would seem that PRSP participation is evolving. In some countries more opportunities are being opened up for civil society – and children and young people's – input.

### 3.2 Ability to influence

Issues around power relations lead on to a thorny question: how realistic is it to expect that children and young people can have any influence on PRSPs? As stated in Chapter 2, there is no point in encouraging children and young people to participate in decision-making when they cannot influence anything. Organisations working with children and young people should consider, preferably in partnership with children and young people, why they might, or might not, encourage children and young people to become involved in a PRSP

process and what this could achieve. Organisations which do facilitate children and young people's participation in PRSP processes should be prepared to work in a two-pronged way: building children and young people's participation and influencing adult decision-makers so that they are prepared to listen. They may have to overcome resistance, particularly on the part of busy policy-makers on a tight timetable to get a PRSP produced in order to receive debt relief or a low-interest loan.

Transparency should be a key principle – if part way through the process it becomes apparent that decision-makers are simply seeking children and young people's views to rubber stamp the PRSP process, this is best discussed by the children and young people, and a decision made on whether to continue involvement. Other avenues can also be sought to communicate their views: eg by organising community meetings, media coverage of their views or an exhibition of their views expressed in art.

Weighing up what children and young people's input achieves is a challenge identified by a number of commentators on children and young people's advocacy in general. In her review of UK participatory projects, Kirby (2002) puts it bluntly: *"We know much more about how to support young people to express their views than we do about how to ensure those views effect change."* But this is not peculiar to children's involvement. Many NGOs are wrestling with how to assess the impact of advocacy in general.

Nevertheless, the question of whether participation can realistically be expected to change anything is a particularly sensitive one in the case of young people who may be embarking on active citizenship for the first time. As noted in Chapter 2, projects where children felt their views were ignored could be worse than no participation at all. They breed disillusionment and unwillingness to get involved again (Kirby, 2002).

Because young people's participation in PRSP processes is mediated by adults, it can leave facilitators open to charges of tokenism – that they are bringing children's views to the table for their own purposes, rather than addressing children's key concerns. Is children's involvement being sought to justify and legitimise PRSPs, while their views are not being listened to seriously and taken into account in policy-making? Are children and young people's energies being co-opted by NGOs or others, when it could be better spent on other issues?

These are challenging questions with no easy answers. They could be asked of civil society input in general. Organisations need to ask such questions of themselves and to be clear about what they think they can achieve. In the end, it can come down to a judgement call about what is right in what circumstance. How far do children and young people want to participate in PRSP processes? Are decision-makers ready to hear children's voices? Are there routes in to official decision-makers? Are there more effective ways of getting children's interests represented? Is children's participation part of a wider initiative where governments, the World Bank and the IMF are initial targets but children's input is also being used to change public opinion or the views of other donors? Can those supporting children and young people's input see long-term changes in official policy towards children's rights and the way childhood poverty is perceived as a result of children's input?

Save the Children's experience of involving children and young people in PRSPs will be discussed in the next chapter. There are some positive experiences that suggest PRSP participation could be part of a long-term process of influencing official thinking and promoting receptivity towards children and young people's input. Children's views have definitely shaped Save the Children's perspectives on poverty and action to address it, and there are some indications of influence upon national governments and international institutions on issues related to PRSPs, such as child labour. But it is a slow process. Save the Children would be wary of claiming clear-cut successes in PRSP influencing, as many changes are incremental. There are also some sceptics within Save the Children, particularly in countries where progress is hard to see, who caution against too much investment in promoting children and young people's involvement at the expense of other forms of engagement.

### **3.3 Appropriateness of children's and young people's engagement**

In Chapter 2 it was argued that children and young people's participation in policy processes is most effective if it relates to their priorities and on matters which affect their day-to-day lives. Few people would claim that children and young people in low-income countries are clamouring to enforce their right to input into PRSP processes. Unlike other development plans, which adults may only be able to influence indirectly by endorsing or rejecting them at elections every few years, PRSPs require governments to involve people affected by poverty.

Very few young people would initially recognise the relevance of PRSPs to their daily lives. But the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines children's right to information on matters that affect their lives, and PRSPs are something children have the right to be informed about. PRSPs are a powerful force which underpins most aspects of children's lives – whether it be their parents' livelihoods, or their own schooling, healthcare and opportunities for the future. Moreover, children of today will be paying off debts in future, so children's stake in shaping PRSPs is high.

But ultimately this judgement is children's, and involvement should be their decision – is the PRSP of sufficient importance to them that they want to become involved?

PRSPs present another problem in that the economic and social policy issues they address are complex and very technical, and PRSP processes bureaucratic and elaborate. Save the Children's experience in many country programmes is that even government employees at local levels can be poorly informed about PRSPs and welcome support from international NGOs in understanding the issues and processes involved. The same goes for adult civil society. The challenge for children and young people, therefore, is even greater. Because of the technical nature of discussions, there is a risk that young people's contribution, when set against more experienced actors fluent in economic and planning issues, can be devalued and not taken seriously. Organisations working with children and young people need to tread a fine line between

communicating issues clearly in terms children can relate to, and not patronising them and over-simplifying issues. Adults also need to be careful that in raising children and young people's awareness about PRSPs, they do not push their own interpretation of issues and restrict children and young people's viewpoints.

These are challenges which require considerable resources – facilitating and resourcing children and young people's groups, producing accessible versions of key documents and finding ways that children and young people's input can be communicated to adults. Involving children and young people in the PRSP process could be a way to build up their capacity to understand economic and social policy. It does not have to be an end in itself – it could be part of a much wider initiative to equip children to play a dynamic role as participating and questioning citizens. (This is not to suggest, however, that participation in the PRSP process should be used as a training ground in citizenship without realistically trying to influence the strategy.)

It must be stressed that the objective of children and young people's involvement in PRSP processes is not to come up with an alternative macroeconomic plan to reduce poverty. Instead, children and young people can work with adults to articulate their experience of poverty, its manifestations in their day-to-day lives, how it affects their families, their schooling, their health, their aspirations and what they want to see changed. Such information can be invaluable in highlighting concerns adults might not think of. For example, consultations with children in Honduras raised the issue of protection from exploitative child labour which the authorities had not addressed in the interim PRSP. In Vietnam, issues such as family separation and violence and psychological stress were raised by children, as well as the plight of urban unregistered migrants who are not able to access healthcare and education.

While recognising the value of children's input on specific issues, it is important that children and young people are not exploited as providers of technical information and denied a wider say on the overriding issues of the PRSP. Williams (2004, quoting McGee, forthcoming) discusses the risk of young people being relegated to the role of information providers. *“There is a risk, however, that newer actors – such as children – are incorporated into policy processes ‘not as citizens or political actors with rights to uphold and interests to defend, but as technical actors who can provide useful information, and that even when cast as such, their actor status will be further compromised because their informational contributions will be subject to parameters of validity, credibility and policy-relevance set and upheld by other, longer-standing, better networked and more expert actors’.*” Organisations involving children in the PRSP processes need to work skilfully to facilitate children's input into advocating on the process or larger determining issues of the PRSP, as well as information provision. This might include children deciding how to use their information and views outside of the PRSP forum, so that they are more in charge of the use of their views.

It is worth considering the implications of deciding *not* to encourage children and young people to participate in the process of PRSPs. Economic and social policy might be a complex issue but so are many other issues which children need to be informed about and given opportunities to speak out about; for example, on laws on child protection, on the UNCRC, or on measures against



child trafficking. Just because something is complex, it does not mean children cannot understand it or have something worthwhile to say. The alternative would be to restrict participation to 'simpler' issues such as the provision of children's recreation facilities or the way individual schools are run. These last two are examples where children and young people's participation has been particularly effective, but most children's organisations and young people themselves would not want to see participation corralled into local or child-specific issues.

### 3.4 Practical implications

A major consideration in embarking on participation in PRSPs is time. Informing children so they can decide whether or not to be involved takes considerable time, as does building their knowledge and capacity around PRSPs and economic and social policy. Genuine participation cannot be achieved instantly. It requires the building up of trust and exchange of ideas, and negotiation of processes over time. All these activities need to be scheduled and timed to fit into official timeframes for PRSP consultation and monitoring. Children themselves lead busy lives, often balancing school, family and work responsibilities, and adult facilitators need to be realistic about the time they ask children to commit. Busy times such as harvest time in rural communities or school exam periods need to be factored in and meetings kept to a minimum at these times. Organisations may decide to discuss compensating children for time taken up in PRSP participation, as discussed in Chapter 4.

A very important consideration in young people's participation is feedback. It can be too easy for children's input into official PRSP processes to get 'lost' in bureaucratic processes. Save the Children and other NGOs have found this to be a problem, and one result is that feedback to children has been neglected because outcomes are unclear. But even if it is not clear what decision-makers will do with the information, there needs to be a debriefing for participating children – information needs to be exchanged between adults and children and vice versa outlining what has been done, the reaction of authorities, any outcome and possible opportunities for future involvement.

One last consideration for participation in PRSPs is the issue of representation. PRSP formulation is often done at national level, and organisations working with children and young people have to consider how to communicate the diversity of children's voices to central government. Just like adults, children are not a homogenous group. Sometimes there will be strongly differing views. It is important that children's voices from the most marginalised groups – such as girls, ethnic minorities, migrants, street children, disabled children, rural children – are represented, whether in official communications or through children's representation. It is important that not just the most articulate and confident children are listened to. Often the experience of children least used to having a public platform can shed the most light on poverty. While it can be effective to bring children in person to present their testimony, organisations need to think carefully about doing this. Are the children really being empowered in such settings? Could it become a process of grooming a group of professional child

representatives? However, if handled carefully children's representation at official meetings can be a dramatic way of persuading adults to listen to children's voices and it can empower children to feel able to put their case in adult forums. Representation can be made more meaningful by organising participatory events at district or community level. Increasingly, there is a trend for regional consultations, such as have happened in Ghana and Kenya, to feed into national decision-making. This is an opportunity for more diverse involvement, particularly in the most marginalised regions, although some of the same considerations about representation apply.

This chapter has looked at some of the challenges in promoting children and young people's participation in PRSP processes. None of these cautions should be taken as a case for advising against encouraging children and young people's participation in PRSP processes. Instead, they are intended to prompt discussion about better ways of ensuring children and young people's participation in PRSPs empowers them and influences poverty planning and action.



## **4 Experience of participation in PRSP processes**

Save the Children UK has been active in promoting children's participation in PRSP processes in three countries (Honduras, Lesotho and Vietnam). This chapter draws on these experiences and touches on other Save the Children country programmes' and other NGOs' experience.

Most of Save the Children's participatory PRSP work has been in the realm of large-scale consultations to gather children and young people's experiences and views. In some countries this has broken new ground – children and young people's experiences have never been officially considered before, as they are assumed to experience the same problems and issues as their families.

Save the Children's participatory initiatives have mainly focused on contributing to the development of PRSPs, although there is also some experience of inputting into reviews of PRSP implementation and influencing ongoing monitoring and evaluation of PRSPs.

Participatory initiatives on PRSPs have required a major commitment of Save the Children staff time and resources in two countries, Vietnam and Honduras, and both these countries have had some notable successes in affecting PRSP content. However, as a whole, participatory youth initiatives on PRSPs are at a fledgling stage. Civil society participation in PRSPs is only just getting off the ground in many countries, and youth participation is an even newer concept.

In the last year Save the Children programmes around the world have started to exchange experiences about PRSP participation in an attempt to learn lessons and plan more effectively for future involvement. This paper is part of this process – to bring together common issues, analyse them and make suggestions about what has been learned so far. The material in this chapter needs to be viewed in this light – as an exploration – rather than as a rigorous analysis of well-documented, systematic initiatives.

The examples from Save the Children's country programmes reflect different ways of involving children and young people in PRSP processes. In Vietnam and Lesotho children and young people have been directly involved in consultations about the PRSP with their views heard by participating government officials. In Honduras, Save the Children has held extensive consultations with children on a range of issues and used them to raise issues, identified as important by the children, in a range of PRSP-related forums. Bosnia and Herzegovina also used previous consultations with children and young people to facilitate their indirect participation in PRSP processes.

### **4.1 Vietnam**

In Vietnam Save the Children has organised three large-scale consultations in Ho Chi Minh City. The aim was to feed children and young people's views and experiences into national poverty planning, and then to monitor the impact on children and young people. The three participatory poverty assessments involved setting up discussion groups, interviews and participatory workshops

with 465 children and young people ranged between the ages of 6 and 18 in three poor districts of the city, with a high proportion of migrants from rural areas. The children and young people's input ran alongside consultations with a wide range of adult community members, but the children and young people's process was conducted separately to ensure that children and young people felt comfortable expressing themselves and that their views were heard independently of adults. The consultations spanned the full PRSP cycle. The first consultation in 1999, before PRSPs existed, was to inform national development planning and the World Bank's *Vietnam Development Report* on poverty. The second consultation in 2001 got feedback on the interim PRSP and policy for the PRSP. The third consultation in 2003 was part of a review of progress on the implementation of the country's first PRSP.

The three consultations all took place in the same geographical area within Ho Chi Minh City, an area in which Save the Children does significant project work on urban poverty and HIV/AIDS prevention. This meant that Save the Children could be sure that this would not be a one-off exercise to fulfil tick boxes on participation. As one Save the Children worker said, staff did not feel it was ethical to embark on endless consultations that did not go anywhere for the children involved unless it was part of more ongoing interaction. The information provided in the PRSP consultations has been used to inform Save the Children's understanding of the communities it works in and has shaped the direction of its project work. It has resulted in the expansion of Save the Children's project work to three more districts, and a decision to work with migrant children.

The focus on the same geographical area also meant that some of the same young people were involved in two or three of the consultations over the course of four years. This built their capacity and confidence to take part in discussion groups and use participatory methods, and also increased their understanding of economic issues and the PRSP process. By the third consultation, more in-depth analysis was developed on what causes families to fall into poverty, the effects of poverty (including social exclusion), and the lack of access to services such as education further compounding poverty.

The PRSP participants included many children taking part in other Save the Children initiatives, so their contributions were based on a number of issues in addition to poverty and PRSPs, such as health education and HIV/AIDS. Some of these young people were able to take more responsibility in later consultations. In the second consultation, two young people from Save the Children's HIV/AIDS peer education project became co-facilitators of the children's workshops, while the adults took notes and provided back-up if needed. The young people played a greater role than just co-workers – they influenced the methodology and the questions asked in the consultations. And later they also contributed to the evaluation.

In general, the input from children and young people painted a similar picture of poverty and its problems for families as did the adult part of the consultation. In particular, it highlighted the plight of the growing numbers of migrant families in Ho Chi Minh City. (These make up over a third of the total population, with migrant numbers increasing by 28–39 per cent in some wards in the space of four years, in others by 65 per cent.) Migrants are not registered by the authorities and have major problems getting access to healthcare, education,

credit and other social assistance. In the third consultation in 2003, half the young participants were migrants so they were able to articulate the specific problems of migrant families clearly. This strong message resulted in a relaxing of bureaucracy to allow unregistered migrants access to services more quickly. It also put the issue of marginalised migrant families firmly on the agenda, and the consultations have informed thinking in the country by both the Government and donors. This is particularly important because the city's development planning is based on the number of people with permanent residence, which in some areas can be less than two-thirds of the actual population.

Children and young people provided valuable insights into household coping strategies that impacted on their futures. Some described being withdrawn from school to save money, going out to work to help support their families, and even mentioned the phenomenon of child trafficking. They identified sickness, irregular work and disability as a major cause of vulnerability and risk. They also gave details of accidents caused by poverty (such as children selling lottery tickets in the street being knocked down by vehicles), highlighted working children's vulnerability to street crime, and talked of the unhealthy environments they were forced to live in, describing pollution, litter, poor housing and lack of environmental hygiene. (See panel below for more detail about the children and young people's insights.)

### **Psychological and social costs of poverty**

In the three consultations in Vietnam, children and young people drew attention to the psychological effects of poverty. They gave a much higher priority to psychological well-being than they did to cash income. Being loved and cared for by their parents, being in good health and having access to education and recreation were the most important issues for them.

However, they strongly connected these issues with poverty. They were very vocal about the fear, insecurity and despondency caused by poverty. They gave compelling insights into the feeling of inadequacy they experienced at not being able to attend school or wear decent clothes, and how envious they felt of richer children. School attenders were concerned about the burden the cost of their education (their uniforms and contributions to school maintenance) placed on their families and many children worried about the cost their healthcare. Children and young people were very aware of their families' level of indebtedness. They highlighted how disempowering the social injustice of poverty was, leading them to despondency and lack of faith in the future.

Children and young people spoke about issues that adults would not normally speak about in Vietnamese society – family discord and divorce caused by the stress of poverty and debt. They spoke of adults not being able to afford healthy forms of recreation and turning to 'social evils' of drink, drugs and gambling. They pointed out that poverty prompted more and more girls and women to marry rich Taiwanese men.

Save the Children in Vietnam is confident that the consultations with children and young people did have an impact on government policy and planning within PRSPs. As well as the concrete changes to the procedures relating to unregistered migrants, which is a significant step forward, the completed PRSP included many more references to children than it had in its planning stages. Of course, this in itself is not a proof of action. But it does show that the Government is at least thinking about the impact of poverty on children and young people, and declarations in the PRSP make it easier for communities to hold the Government to account for action. Save the Children's Vietnam Programme Director Bill Tod observes that the three consultations have helped communities to pressure the authorities to fulfil their obligations to citizens as outlined in the grassroots democracy decree of 1998 (revised in 2003) which commits local authorities to consultation with communities. Children and young people in particular have started pressing for more information, and are expressing a desire to be consulted over decisions on education and healthcare.

The programme also identified some examples of local government officials in Ho Chi Minh City learning from the process of children and young people's participation and being willing to put it into practice themselves. Following on from the Save the Children consultations, officials from the Committee of Population, Family and Children, a key partner of Save the Children's, organised with UNICEF a series of forums with children on life skills. And more recently in mid-2003, the city's Committee on AIDS Prevention organised a forum where children and local government officials discussed issues related to HIV/AIDS prevention. This was a significant step forward. Save the Children Programme Worker Nguyen Thi Hai says: *"Children's voices were listened to by the authorities and used for the process of policy-making and programming relating to children and HIV/AIDS."*

However, although the local authorities which have a close relationship with Save the Children did seem to be learning from the process of children and young people's participation in the PRSP, the third consultation met with a critical response from the Government. It claimed that the participatory research, which identified 30–50 per cent of households in the two districts studied as poor, failed to recognise the success of the Government's poverty alleviation programme. The Government criticised the inclusion of ordinary people's views as ill-informed and of "low culture", and described the children's input as "simple minded", "incorrect" and based on a lack of knowledge. Save the Children stood by the research, and has entered into a dialogue with officials, emphasising that over half of the researchers were government staff and that the methodology had been used twice before and had been approved by the Government. However, the organisation has taken pains to point out that the research is not an evaluation of the official poverty alleviation programme, which encompasses a much wider area than the two districts studied.

## 4.2 Honduras

In Honduras Save the Children has been involved in five consultations with children and young people, together with its partners, which have shaped its advocacy on the country's PRSP and economic policy. These started with a

consultation in 2000 which provided information on children's experiences and views on poverty and external debt. It ran alongside the official process of framing the interim PRSP to bring debt relief in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, which devastated the country's economy.

Then in 2001, in co-ordination with the Ministry of Labour, Save the Children organised an extensive consultation of 3,000 children across the country on child labour. As well as one-off consultative meetings, this initiative included a three-day workshop for 70 children and young people. The number one priority identified by children was the provision of flexible forms of education to enable working children to combine paid work with schooling. Other needs highlighted by working children were for better employment opportunities and fairer wages for parents so children don't have to work and can attend school. They also called for policy-makers to understand the complexity of child labour – that children need to work to survive, and that all child labour cannot be eliminated by legal change.

The results of the consultation influenced the Government's National Technical Council drafting the PRSP to make the link between child labour and poverty. They also persuaded the Ministry of Labour and other council members to prioritise childhood poverty and include targets within the PRSP on reducing child labour. Save the Children's Programme Director in the region Jenny Vaughan says: *"The impact of the influencing is clear to see: The PRSP has a very clear and relatively comprehensive section on eliminating the worst forms of child labour... Out of five categories of 'programmes and projects' two are focusing on working children (one is progressive reduction of child labour and the other is protection of adolescent working children)."* As advocated by Save the Children, the National Plan of Action to eradicate the worst forms of child labour has been included within the PRSP and lobbying continues to make sure it is funded under the PRSP. This is complicated by the fact that donors have only committed about a quarter of the funds needed to implement the PRSP. In February 2004 Save the Children reached an agreement with the Ministry of Labour to negotiate with the Minister of Education to ensure that some of the funds released through concessionary loans will benefit child labourers.

In 2002, in co-ordination with governmental and other non-governmental actors, Save the Children organised a consultation with children and young people on Honduras's National Plan of Action on Children and Adolescents 2003–2010, which governments attending the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002 agreed to formulate. Fifty children from all over the country participated in the Honduras consultation to contribute to the Government's plan to improve the lives of children and young people over the next decade. Although the consultation wasn't focused on the PRSP specifically, it did raise issues closely related to it such as child labour, poverty and education.

In 2003 there was an official review of the implementation of the PRSP, involving meetings with civil society organisations. Save the Children organised a small consultation involving 30 children and young people to input into the official review. Working with national NGOs as its partner organisations, Save the Children strove to make sure the children attending were representative of a diverse range of children most affected by poverty. Save the Children drafted a



child-friendly version of the PRSP, and one of the participating young people edited it further so it could become the basis for discussions. The mini-consultation employed creative methods such as art, puppetry and role play to discuss the issues of poverty, international financial institutions and the PRSP. The children and young people set up a mock debating forum where they acted out the views of government representatives, civil society organisations and children (see panel below for results).

### **Learning about poverty**

Children and young people in Honduras contributing to a review of the implementation of the PRSP in 2003 identified failures in the education system as a key problem. They spoke out about the lack of school materials and chairs, teachers not reporting for work, and poor teaching methods (in particular, teachers not listening to children). Working children stressed the need for flexibility on the part of schools so that they could fit schooling around employment. They also called for fair wages for children, and for the provision of work appropriate for their ages, and spoke out against violence by employers.

Children and young people made a major link between poverty and the disintegration of families. Children talked of parents migrating to the USA for work and children being left without adequate parental support. Participants emphasised children's need for care and support, and explained that if parents were not able to provide it then young people might turn to gangs for peer support and a sense of belonging. The climate of violence against, and abuse of, children at home and on the streets was decried. The children and young people criticised state organisations for failing to protect them. Lack of healthcare was also a concern, in particular corruption in the distribution of medicines.

Save the Children's informal consultation was fed into the official civil society consultation, also attended by other organisations representing children and young people and by six representatives from the young people's consultation. Although there was some disappointment at the lack of depth of representation of civil society at the official consultation (with only a limited number of organisations represented, focusing on a narrow range of issues), engagement with the PRSP processes has strengthened citizenship. Over the course of PRSP involvement, civil society has become better informed and engaged, and organisations more skilled at articulating their views. Stronger alliances have been formed between civil society organisations, and dialogues have begun between government decision-makers.

Save the Children is now being funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) to undertake pilot research into monitoring PRSP implementation at regional and national level, linked to the proposed decentralisation of PRSP implementation. This research includes looking at how to involve civil society, including children and young people, in monitoring and

evaluation. The study will look at developing qualitative indicators for reducing poverty, rather than just quantitative targets, and address some of the issues raised by children and young people, such as family support and child protection. It will also investigate ways of building community capacity for monitoring and evaluating progress on meeting these indicators. Save the Children is also currently providing input into a consultation being carried out by the International Co-operation in Honduras (ACI) aimed at developing PRSP participation among marginalised groups, including children and young people.

In November 2003 Save the Children, together with its partners, undertook a further consultation with children and young people focusing on the contents of the draft National Plan of Action on Children and Adolescents. A total of 53 young people aged between 10 and 22 attended the meeting where they discussed their views on the latest draft plan. During the consultation, the young people commented on a proposed new law to protect children against sexual abuse and exploitation. They cited the PRSP as one of the foundations of the National Plan of Action on Children and Adolescents.

The Honduran Government has decided that part of the funds freed up by debt relief will fund activities related to the PRSP, such as the National Plan of Action on the eradication of child labour.

### 4.3 Other Save the Children initiatives

In **Lesotho** Save the Children participated in the early stages of the Technical Working Group, charged with producing the country's PRSP, in order to make sure that children's perspectives were incorporated. In 2002 the working group set up ten thematic groups to make recommendations on key issues within the PRSP such as gender, HIV/AIDS and nutrition. Save the Children and UNICEF successfully lobbied the Ministry of Development to establish a thematic group on children and youth, and to include six young participants aged between 11 and 18. All six children had previously been involved in working with NGOs on issues such as law reform and government plans to address children's issues.

As well as working with adult participants to set targets for sectors affecting children and youth, the children and young people decided that it was important that officials heard the voices and stories of real children. They produced a paper containing the stories of children and young people gathered from the Children's Forum held in 2002 in the lead-up to the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children which gave compelling testimony on issues such as HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy and child abuse.

Save the Children and UNICEF lobbied the Ministry of Development to convene a special session of the PRSP Technical Working Group to hear those stories from the young people representatives. The testimony produced a range of responses from the adult members of the Technical Working Group. Some were shocked at the neglect experienced by so many children, and others criticised the presentation, saying it was too negative and should have focused on the happier experiences of children. The young people responded strongly, with the youngest member aged 11 standing up, to a round of applause, and saying that

they could not pretend that all was well in Lesotho and paint a pretty picture. As a result, the Technical Working Group invited Save the Children and UNICEF to become involved in the drafting process of the PRSP. Although the young people's participation was judged to be great success, one weakness identified by Save the Children was the lack of systems of feedback between the young representatives and a wider constituency of children and young people.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, rather than set up participatory initiatives specific to PRSPs, Save the Children drew on insights from previous consultations and work with young people on poverty and economic policy issues, and fed these insights into the organisation's engagement with the PRSP. This involved participating in various consultations and submitting detailed written comments to the PRSP Secretariat.

## 4.4 Other NGO experience

Other NGOs have involved children and young people in contributing to the PRSP process as part of a general promotion of civil society involvement, but it appears that none have specialised in involving children and young people. Like Save the Children, many NGOs are just beginning to document and take stock of the experience of participation for their constituencies. There are many parallels between facilitating the involvement of marginalised groups, such as women, and children and young people, but there are also specific issues related to children and young people's participation. The exchange of experiences will be instructive.

### 4.4.1 Guyana Youth in Development

Save the Children has discussed the issue of young people's involvement with a national Guyanan young people's organisation, Youth in Development.\* The organisation was given training in 2000 by Guyana's government-run Poverty Reduction Secretariat and asked to organise countrywide consultations with civil society on the formulation of the PRSP. Youth in Development then organised a wide-ranging consultation involving 30 workshops across the country. However, Youth in Development organisers were disappointed by the lack of youth representation at the meetings and managed to get government funding to organise a special youth consultation involving 80 young people representing the country's ten regions. Although the country's definition of young people extends to 35-year-olds, most of the participants were in their late teens and early 20s. The consultation produced two main demands: a call for a youth representative on the Poverty Reduction Secretariat, and the formation of a small network of youth organisations to keep in contact and update each other on progress.

However, the outcome was disappointing. Although the official PRSP document acknowledged the youth consultation, it did not address the specific issues raised

\*An interview with Sauda Kadir, a representative of Youth in Development, conducted by Shahina Bahar.



by young people. The Poverty Reduction Secretariat did not provide young people with feedback, even on their request for representation at policy-making level. The secretariat has since been disbanded, so this route is closed. However, the problems of securing official recognition of young people's input into PRSP are not unique to young people. Youth in Development reports that the whole PRSP process in Guyana was characterised by lack of information and limited civil society involvement. The organisation is continuing its advocacy, particularly on getting information from the Government about monitoring the implementation of the PRSP, and opportunities to input into it.

#### **4.4.2 Plan**

Plan has assessed its experience in PRSP processes internationally in early 2003. This NGO does not target children or young people's involvement, but civil society input in general. This includes addressing the rights and concerns of children and young people, particularly in the fields of education and health. The organisation questions how much PRSP policy-makers are genuinely willing to listen to the views of civil society. Plan country programmes have experienced token consultation in a rushed process with draft reports only being available in English, making it difficult for smaller NGOs to input. The organisation is weighing up the relative merits of being involved in what could be described as top-down processes of official input in PRSPs, or trying to influence them from the bottom-up. The bottom-up approach would be based on its work at local level on issues such as education or female genital mutilation which has already influenced local, regional and national governments and informed PRSPs.

### **4.5 Issues arising**

#### **4.5.1 Opportunities for influence**

How realistic is it to expect the authorities formulating PRSPs to genuinely take account of children and young people's views and experiences? There is plenty of room for cynicism about power structures, bureaucracy and entrenched narrow channels of decision-making. There are many examples where adults' reaction to children and young people's participation has been negative. All organisations could tell cynical stories, but is that the real point? It may be unproductive to stand on the sidelines and criticise PRSPs without engaging in the opportunities they offer and trying to make a difference. In many countries, PRSPs are a major opportunity for citizens to influence development policy. Civil society's task is to use whatever leverage it can to ensure that children and young people's experiences and views, like those of other people affected most by poverty, shape initiatives to combat poverty while maintaining their independence and not becoming co-opted into existing power relationships.

In Honduras, Save the Children is convinced of the value of using a single issue – in this case, child labour – as an entry point into policy-making to combat poverty. It was an area in which Save the Children had done substantial work,

and had been neglected in the interim PRSP. Children and young people's voices were helpful in providing missing information and flagging up important connections between different aspects of policy-making. Their viewpoints contributed to more joined-up policy-making, with child labour policies linked to poverty reduction strategies. Save the Children in Honduras advocates choosing a tangible issue with clear targets, such as reducing child labour, in order to cut through what could be seen as the confusing generality of strategies to reduce child poverty.

Opportunities for influence are not just at the level of central government or IFIs. Other civil society organisations, individual government officials, local authorities, the media and donor organisations can all be targets for influence. Even if the completed PRSP does not fully reflect children and young people's voices, their input may affect planning at a local level which can have a major effect on children's lives. Or, it may be a powerful demonstration to others about how to involve children and young people meaningfully, and convince them of its worth. This has been the case in Vietnam, where involving two young people as co-facilitators was an impressive practical lesson for local officials about young people's potential to co-ordinate contributions. As a result of being involved in supporting the consultations, local authorities in Ho Chi Minh City organised similar consultations with children and young people on other issues. And communities involved in Save the Children's consultations in Vietnam have voiced a determination to hold the Government to account for promises they make.

Achieving specific spaces for children and young people's input into Honduras's PRSP was seen as a success. Save the Children's willingness to organise and finance a specific young people's consultation on the Honduran PRSP review prior to a wider civil society meeting was welcomed by a major Honduran child rights network. But questions were asked by the Government about why children and young people's input couldn't be made at the wider meeting. When it was explained that children needed more time and space to digest the implications of the PRSP, this was accepted. Save the Children's regional Programme Co-ordinator Jolanda Vrielink says: *"I think it is fair to say that progress has been made in taking children seriously, and that child participation is more than ever an issue that is on the agenda (but also tends to fall off the agenda rather quickly)."* Save the Children in Honduras also identifies improved collaboration between donors concerned with child well-being as one of the by-products of its promotion of children and young people's participation in PRSPs.

An important issue that Save the Children is mindful of is the need for international NGOs to support indigenous civil society organisations rather than undercutting their role. In Honduras Save the Children worked with local partner organisations, each contributing their expertise and learning. Save the Children played a linking role in civil society's input because of its dual expertise in anti-poverty policy and children's participation. In Honduras, civil society is well developed, but fragmented, and local organisations do have experience of advocacy on economic issues and children's issues, but none have both, so Save the Children acted as a bridge. In Vietnam, where civil society is still relatively undeveloped, the three consultations organised by Save the Children were part of nationwide consultative processes co-organised by the

Government and donors and implemented by a variety of organisations – international NGOs, local NGOs and local research institutes. All Save the Children consultations involved partnership with local officials and researchers from local research institutions. Aware that some local NGOs have felt excluded from PRSP processes, Save the Children has advocated for the increasing role of civil society organisations and has helped to build up the capacity of local researchers. In Lesotho, Save the Children worked with the Child Rights Coalition to support its engagement in PRSP processes.

#### **4.5.2 Children and young people's perspectives**

Children and young people's participation has certainly influenced Save the Children's analysis of poverty and how it can be combated. Research into children's experiences and viewpoints has been a key part of Save the Children's work over many years, and PRSP involvement has built on this. Children provide a different and important view of the impact of poverty on families, often voicing truths that adults no longer notice, or which socialised adults are wary of expressing (such as family violence or substance abuse). For example, the viewpoints of child labourers have shaped a rethinking on child labour policies to take account of the fact that many children enjoy working and could not survive without it. Children's experiences have been crucial in understanding how poverty affects families at household levels, including decisions about education and the allocation of scarce resources such as money or food. This cumulative learning about children's lives has helped shape Save the Children's advocacy on PRSPs, and has informed its participatory initiatives.

Staff involved in PRSP consultations have commented on the breadth of the viewpoints taken by children and young people in PRSP analysis. It has been noted that children and young people have addressed wide issues and have not just looked at their own individual needs; instead they have borne in mind the needs of their peers, their families and communities more widely.

As well as raising specific issues (such as the quality of education, child labour and the problems of migrants) which are often left out of research focused on the quantitative picture, children and young people have emphasised the effect of poverty on the whole person. They have highlighted the social impact of poverty – on family conflict, break-up, violence, drug abuse and the growth of gang culture. These are important warning bells about the long-term impact of poverty, and the negative way it will shape communities around the world if it is not addressed urgently. Children and young people's participation has also highlighted the price children pay for poverty in terms of the damage to their psychological health and outlook for the future. It is obvious what lack of food does to children's physical development, but the impact of fear, stress and insecurity associated with poverty may not be so evident to policy-makers. PRSPs are not just about achieving numerical targets, they should improve citizens' quality of life, and children and young people's input contains important pointers about the problems and connections. How much these issues have been taken up immediately in PRSPs is questionable, but these are long-

term problems and there are no instant solutions. Signalling problems and building an understanding of them is an important step in achieving social change.

### **4.5.3 The impact on children and young people**

Not surprisingly, the impact of involvement in the PRSP on children and young people depends on the nature of their participation. One-off consultations are likely to be less informative and empowering than ongoing work with children and young people. However, even a one-off involvement may plant the seeds of ideas or an appetite for involvement which bears fruit in later years. But, in general, long-term involvement is much more effective in building children and young people's capacities and understanding of citizenship. In Vietnam, this is achieved by linking PRSP consultations to project work. Children and young people are not receiving and providing information on PRSPs in isolation, they are also being encouraged to reflect more widely on other issues they and Save the Children are involved in, such as HIV/AIDS.

In Honduras, children and young people expressed their desire to be involved in ongoing work on PRSPs rather than just one-off regional and national consultations. However, balanced against this is the need for consideration of the cost of participation to children and young people. Organisations need to be mindful of the cost to children and young people of involvement in PRSPs versus the benefits, particularly in the case of child labourers, but also for children attending school. Some Save the Children programmes are confident that children and young people get a lot out of involvement – that even one-off consultations go beyond extracting information and build children and young people's confidence. Children have fun if the methods employed are appropriate, these programmes say. Others caution against involving too much time in initiatives that children and young people might find it difficult to see any benefits in, especially if the outcome is not likely to be easy to measure.

Save the Children programmes often compensate children and young people for transport costs and provide snacks and educational materials for participants in consultations. The organisation is exploring appropriate ways of compensating children and young people financially for time spent at consultations. Programmes are finding appropriate solutions locally. In Vietnam, compensation was considered carefully in discussions with the local authorities. The children and young people taking part in the first two consultations were provided with snacks and treats and transport fares. However, the third consultation involved an older age group – 12–16 year olds – and working young people were compensated financially. But in the case of working children, they only received two-thirds of the adult payment in cash, the other third was paid in kind, through snacks and treats. In Honduras, decisions were taken on a case-by-case basis. If children and young people would normally be out earning money, then financial compensation was considered. In the November 2003 consultation on the National Plan of Action on Children and Adolescents, Save the Children financially compensated three domestic workers whose employers agreed to their participation but refused to pay them for their three days' absence.

#### 4.5.4 Good practice

Save the Children has positive experiences of using ***a wide range of participatory methods*** based on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods to facilitate children and young people's input into PRSP processes. These include: wealth ranking of their communities, community mapping exercises, games, art, puppetry and role play. These have been used alongside more conventional research methods such as one-to-one interviews, focus groups and general discussions which enable the more creatively-sourced information to be put into context and interpretations checked. These methods have also proved successful with adults who are not literate or not used to contributing to policy discussions, and have been adapted slightly for children and young people's input. These diverse methods have proved successful in eliciting children and young people's contributions. For example, in Tanzania the national Participatory Poverty Assessment process developed a rap song with marginalised young men in Dar Es Salaam, as part of a process to elicit their views on poverty and how the PRSP was addressing them.\* A popular musician worked with the young men to develop a powerful, hard-hitting song which reached number two in the local pop charts.

However, in some cases, the use of creative methods have proved difficult to communicate to adult decision-makers. Some degree of adult interpretation may be necessary, which can lead to adult viewpoints colouring or framing children and young people's input. Finding ways of communicating subjective creative input is a challenge in which Save the Children staff and others are currently engaged.

Save the Children has also gained valuable experience in producing ***child-friendly versions of the PRSP*** to facilitate children and young people's discussion. This has involved simplifying concepts, explaining issues and using language that is relevant to children and young people, including those not from the majority language group. In Honduras the adult-produced child-friendly version was then further edited by a young person for appropriateness. Save the Children programmes in Tanzania and Bangladesh are planning similar activities in forthcoming PRSP consultations.

***Adequate timeframes*** to inform children and young people and ensure that processes and information are child friendly have been a major factor for country programmes. In Honduras children and young people's participation in the PRSP review was affected by the rushed nature of the process. *"The Government wants it all done quickly and not much time is available for thorough preparation,"* Save the Children's Jolanda Vrielink comments. *"In general, people with little experience in reading complicated documents in the so-called official language, or reading at all, need more time to fully understand and discuss the issue. Nobody who is not directly working in the area can make sensible comments within one month or less."* The need for adequate time for consideration of the issues has also been flagged up by other marginalised groups.

\*[http://www.esrftz.org/ppa/Hali\\_Duni.htm](http://www.esrftz.org/ppa/Hali_Duni.htm)



Another question to tackle is representation. How much can children and young people taking part in PRSP processes be said to be representative of the views of children and young people generally? In Honduras, despite the tight timeframe, Save the Children went to great lengths to ensure that the children and young people taking part in the PRSP review included marginalised groups such as rural children and young people, street children and working children. This was done through drawing up guidelines for local partner organisations who invited children and young people to attend. In Vietnam, local officials selected a group of children and young people who were representative in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and disability. They also ensured that marginalised children and young people, such as those not attending school, were in the group.

Save the Children's experience of supporting children in a range of participatory activities raises important issues about the value of a wide outreach by involving different children and young people in consultations over a period of time, versus building up contact with a regular group of children and young people. When children and young people come to the process as new participants, they need substantial orientation and information before they can participate. This means that debate can stay at the same basic level over the course of several consultations. But the danger of ongoing consultations with the same children and young people is that an elite group of children and young people may be groomed who are fluent in the language and processes of PRSPs and who become removed from the lives of ordinary children and young people and are less representative. Save the Children has had other experience of the risks of **'professionalising' child spokespeople**, particularly through its involvement in child participation at international conferences, and staff are alert to the need to build the skills of children and young people's groups, not individual 'stars'.

## **5 Conclusion**

With PRSPs entering their fifth year of existence, and some countries embarking on a second PRSP, civil society input appears to have secured a foothold into PRSP processes. There are grounds for optimism that the climate may be opening up for children and young people's input. The challenges are many, but so are the opportunities.

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