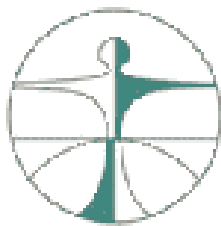


Strengthening Child-Led Organisations

Report of a Supporting Event organised by International Save the Children Alliance and Girl Scouts of the USA under the umbrella of the Under 18 Participation Task Force (U18PTF) during the United Nations Special Session on Children, New York, May 2002



Introduction

This two-hour workshop highlighted how child-led/children's organisations and movements have been able to promote children's participation, self-advocacy and representation.

Representatives from three child-led organisations led the event:

- ◆ the **African Movement of Working Children and Youth**
- ◆ the **Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia**, and
- ◆ **Bhima Sangha**, a working children's union from Karnataka State in Southern India

The workshop was facilitated by a representative from the European Youth Forum. The chairperson, Havard Ovrengard, in introducing the event, highlighted the importance of Article 12 of the UNCRC, affirming children's right to express themselves, including children's and young people's right to represent themselves on matters that concern their lives.

Following a brief introduction to each of the children's organisations by the chairperson, each representative explained in more detail what his or her organisation is doing, the factors that have helped its development, the obstacles that have stood in their way and how they have dealt with them.

The young people's presentations were followed by responses from adult representatives from Save the Children, ENDA and Girls Scouts of the USA who shared their respective organisation's perspectives on child-led organisations. This was followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience.

Perspectives from Child-Led Organisations



The African Movement of Working Children and Youth

PRESENTATION BY SOPHIE AMELIA FAYE

The African Movement of Working Children and Youth (AMWCY) began in 1994 in 5 towns in 4 countries of West Africa. It is now in 41 towns in 15 countries across Africa and is about to start work in another 17 towns. When it began, it drew up a declaration of 12 points that has become its plan of action. It works to implement this plan at the local, national, regional, and international levels. It is a movement of children but is supported by adult NGOs and facilitated by ENDA.

The AMWCY consists of a series of grassroots groups that form associations at the town level. These associations come together nationally in larger groups that, in turn, elect their representatives at the regional level. One of the challenges for the Movement is to find organisational forms that are as participatory and action-oriented as possible.

The AMWCY has made much use of participatory action research. Its members have been trained in management issues, including financial management. Training is provided for working children in centres, including night centres. Much work is done to raise awareness among parents and the wider society/community.

Each year the Day of the African Child, and Labour Day on May 1, are marked with special activities. Each association is supported financially with a small annual allowance, which is generally invested in income-generating schemes that help to finance each association's regular activities.

The AMWCY has experienced difficulties in meeting with both national and international authorities. Its members feel that they have made progress in achieving their rights, but that many problems for children still remain. For example, one of the original 12 points recognises the right to stay in the village. To achieve this they have organised forums in villages to try and keep children and young people from migrating to towns. They have started projects to improve schools and create activity centres in the villages.

The movement's future objective is to grow nationally and regionally and to make progress on realising children's rights.

The Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia

PRESENTATION BY FABIO NELSON CALAMBAS

The Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia was created in 1996. It is a movement initiated by children, whose immediate focus is children. From this base the children's movement reaches out to the wider society to promote respect for children's rights and a culture of peace.

Eight thousand children are involved in the movement nationally. They organise themselves around local units that then feed into regional and national forum/units.

Through their movement, children are working for the construction of a culture of peace through the transformation of values. This work takes place within families and communities. The movement holds workshops where children learn how they can begin building this culture of peace in their own local communities. The children also learn to be leaders and train other children to start new groups to work for peace.

Children have involved their parents in the process and have engaged adults in voting for children's rights – for the right to education, to life and liberty, for protection from violence and armed conflict. Seven and a half million people in Colombia have voted for children's rights.

The main difficulties the movement has confronted relate to the continuing violence within their country. With armed groups trying to keep them silent, it is dangerous for them to march and demand their rights.

The movement's future objectives are to stop the involvement of children in violence and armed conflict, either as actors or victims, and to halt the displacement of children and families from villages. Members see the need to deal with issues relating to children who are abandoned or orphaned because of the continuing conflict. They dream of education for all and of children living with their families, on their own land, in peace.



Bhima Sangha, A Working-Children's Union, Southern India

PRESENTATION BY BALASURBRAMANIA

Bhima Sangha, a working-children's union, is 13 years old. Now with 15,000 individual members, the movement was initiated by working children.

Bhima Sangha is composed of working committees, which are based on geographic regions in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. Children elect the committee members, who in turn make and implement plans with support from adults.

Bhima Sangha began to celebrate April 30 as Child Labour Day. One notable success in their advocacy efforts is that April 30 is now officially recognised by the state government. Bhima Sangha also works with the provincial government to identify and help working children and to bring them into government planning programmes.

Bhima Sangha works at the community level to find solutions to problems together with adults but based on children's needs. For example, local governments now provide working children with the possibility to study and work. A living experience of democracy has been created at the local level through the establishment of children's governments (panchayats). These panchayats help to find solutions for children at the local level and, help to create spaces in which girls can actively participate in decision-making processes and in which their specific concerns can be met. This local democracy has created room for all children from 6 to 18 years (not just working children) to participate at the village level.

The main difficulties Bhima Sangha has encountered include the inability of girls to participate. To counter this obstacle the Movement has worked with families to convince them to allow girls to participate in the organisation. Bhima Sangha members also encounter problems in the workplace, especially from their employers when they demand their working rights. Other issues that Bhima Sangha is trying to address include child marriage, family migration, the creation of more associations of working children at the regional level, and ultimately of a world-wide movement.

One of Bhima Sangha's future objectives is the creation of a society that provides structures where children can be advocates for their rights.

Perspectives from Adult Organisations

Save the Children

PRESENTATION BY ANNETTE GIERTSEN



Save the Children highlighted the following four issues:

- ◆ how the organisation sees issues relating to child-led initiatives and processes
- ◆ the role of adults
- ◆ the question of partnerships
- ◆ some reflections on how child-led initiatives have influenced and enriched the work of Save the Children

How Save the Children Sees Issues Relating to Child-Led Initiatives and Processes

Child-led organisations do not arise suddenly. They evolve out of a long process, generally through close co-operation and partnerships between children and NGOs. Over time some children's organisations have developed into movements and others into new forms of partnerships.

The Role of Adults

Adults need to create spaces where children can meet, where they can come together to discuss without adults the issues that concern their lives. The attitudes of adults towards children's initiatives is critical, especially the need to recognise when to change their role from being responsible for plans and activities and when to step aside as and when children take on more responsibilities and initiate more of their own ideas. It is important to support children with respect. Adults need to enable children to identify and understand the context in which they are operating. They also need to enable children to understand the importance and consequences of their choices, without making decisions for them. Furthermore, adults need to enable children to develop their analytical skills to understand the wider socio-cultural and political situation. Adults can also offer support in building the skills necessary for children to develop and manage their own projects and initiatives.

Partnerships

Some children's organisations have adults to help take care of funding relations with donors. There are also examples of small groups of children who receive direct financial support for a project as a partner organisation. Adult organisations have their own formalities and need to become more child-friendly in order to enable and encourage better partnerships with children.

Reflections: Influenced and Enriched

There is recognition that child-led organisations achieve a lot in a short space of time. Children's organisations can have a greater impact when it comes to promoting and making progress on children's rights. The work of child-led organisations guarantees that what we do is in the best interest of children. Child-led initiatives show us how projects can work in a different way, how they can be more open, flexible and issue-driven processes. One example is that of child journalists not only reporting on an issue but also taking action until the problem is solved.



Girl Scouts of the USA

PRESENTATION BY JUDY SCHOENBERG

The representative from Girl Scouts of the USA focused on three issues:

- ◆ how much there is for the USA and Europe to learn from work in the South
- ◆ youth-led initiatives in Girl Scouts of the USA
- ◆ future ideas to further develop child-led organisations

Learning from the South

The USA is behind in advancing true child- and youth-led initiatives, especially at a national level. Most youth-led initiatives in the U.S. exist at a local level, while at the national level there is no common agenda. However, in the last decade there has been some focus on building upon the strengths and talents that youth can bring, and young people are now increasingly being seen as assets in their community.

The strengths of the child-led organisations presented today seem to draw upon:

- ◆ solid local and national structures
- ◆ peer-to-peer training to set up organisations
- ◆ a platform for rights (with an emphasis on changing values) a community-based approach

However, the participation of girls has also been highlighted as an obstacle, since a lot more effort is needed to convince families and communities to encourage their girls to participate.

Youth-Led initiatives of Girl Scouts of the USA

In the Girl Scouts of the USA girls (aged 11-17 years) are coming forward. Recent research involving over 3000 girls (Scouts and non-Scouts) has discovered that girls want programmes by girls for girls with equal partnership with adults. To the girls, “partnership with adults” means being listened to, heard, and taken seriously by adults, as well as “Let us make our own mistakes,” and “Talk up to us, instead of down to us.”

Issues of safety are also of great importance to the girls, especially since September 11th. Girls feel the need for safe places and spaces to talk about safety issues at home and in school, including issues of personal and physical violence and date rape. The girls also feel the need for self-defence training.

Future Ideas:

- ◆ investing in youth-led initiatives for many years
- ◆ training adults on how to let go of power
- ◆ sharing experiences and information to learn from each other
- ◆ increasing youth voices and opportunities for youth participation at all levels
- ◆ looking at differences between girls and boys



Environmental Development Action in the Third World

PRESENTED BY FABRIZIO TEREZIO

Fabrizio re-emphasised the fact that child led organisations do not arise spontaneously, but through a long process. It has taken nine years to build such a large network in Africa. Furthermore, a methodology of “participatory action research” (PAR) has been developed after five years. PAR enables identification of problems, prioritisation, analysis, and planning to target the causes of the problem. This methodological work has been based on the organisational work of many NGOs in Africa. The challenge has been how to transfer these tools to the children, and how to identify their problems and solutions most effectively.

If we talk of a children’s movement it must be acknowledged that over time as the children grow as leaders, they also become older and become adults! Thus, it is important to continuously involve younger children in the movement. It can also help to involve the youth in training as they also use their experience and expertise (e.g. in problem-solving, lobbying, income generation and literacy training) to support the development and activities of the associations in the towns and villages.

Over eight years of the AMWCY we have seen how children’s organisations can help to bring about the realisation of their rights. However, the balance between the adult and children’s organisations is a constantly dynamic and changing one. Adults must not hide, but need to find a role to make effective partnerships. Furthermore, the tensions between the children’s economic situation (poverty) and work towards realisation of their rights also continues to be a key tension in the movement.

Question and Answer Sessions

Q. How do you get your movements to function?

AMWCY: The social activists/educators support us. We decide what action we want to take. If we have a problem we ask the adults to support us.

Bhima Sangha: In Bhima Sangha we have membership fees. We also raise money within communities and we have donors.

AMWCY: We mobilise at the community level. ENDA gives financial support to the self-organisation of working children and youth and helps them develop their income-generating activities.

Q. I understand that your organisations are locally based, rather than at the national level. What are you doing to bring your issues to the national level?

Children's Movement for Peace: The movement in Colombia is national. We have local meetings and then national meetings. We also go to schools and talk to children. Such school meetings also enable younger children to join our movement. We hold workshops and seminars that have the effect of multiplying the impact and knowledge of our work. The rural and urban contexts are very different. At the urban level we can work in neighbourhoods, whereas in rural areas we can get the total involvement of an entire community.

AMWCY: We have associations in the towns, as well at national and international levels.

Bhima Sangha: Through our peer group we identify our friends, share our experiences and tell them about our platform, so they also become members. In the rural areas we started in some villages and are now spreading out into new villages. At a national level there are 11 working-children's unions coming together as a movement of working children. In different ways we are pressuring the Government to start a Children's Commission so that our issues can be presented directly to the Parliament. India is very big. We work in just one state of India, Karnataka, but this state has a population of 50 million with 100 different spoken languages. This is just to give you some idea of the sheer magnitude of what we are doing.

Q. Until what age is a child considered a child under Indian law?

Bhima Sangha: In India different policies define the age of a child differently. For example, you can have free education until the age of 11 but you cannot work below the age of 14. Bhima Sangha refers to the CRC {Convention on the Rights of the Child} and considers all children up to the age of 18 years to be children.

Q. Do you envisage a day when the building of youth and children's movements will be complete? How do you envisage the balance between children and adults?

Bhima Sangha: Bhima Sangha is for working children. However, we are starting children's rights associations for all children. Also, when children/youth reach 18 years of age they become part of "Namma Sabha" a youth association.

Q. Lots of children do not have access to education or technology. What are your children's organisations doing about this?

Bhima Sangha: In relation to education and vocational training, with the support of an adult organisation called CWC we have initiated education alongside with work, whereby child workers can also sit for formal exams. We have also tried to improve the school system by gaining the co-operation of the government to improve the quality and curriculum in the schools. The government is initiating a ‘National Child Labour Programme’ to ensure no child under the age of 14 years old works.

Q. For child-led organisations to move on you need many more members. How do you ensure there is continuation and permanence?

Children’s Movement for Peace: To maintain continuity in our Peace Movement we hold weekly meetings on Saturdays when there are no classes. The children are aware and enthusiastic in the meetings. We also organise workshops and recreational activities at a neighbourhood level. NGOs like World Vision also support us with funds and other types of support.

Session Summing up and closing words

The Chairperson thanked all presenters, respondents, interpreters and participants. He re-emphasised the importance of adults' attitudes in enabling child-led organisations to develop and strengthen. We need to overcome all forms of prejudice, including discrimination based on age. Child-led organisations can be the best way of showing that prejudice based on age is unfounded. The young presenters also thanked the organisers for the opportunity to share their experiences, whilst also highlighting additional opportunities and events during the Special Session for information-sharing and future collaboration.

“Children still have their dreams. We can recreate dreams in adults”

— Bala, Bhima Sangha

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