

Children's Participation and Sexual Violence

Helen Veitch, Oak Fellow on Children's Participation in Preventing Sexual Violence

Agenda for today

- **Key issues that prevent us from ‘getting it right’ on the issue of children’s participation**
- **Common ethical dilemmas and how these can be addressed**
- **The bigger picture and how children’s participation fits in funding priorities**
- **Standards on children’s participation – and the issue of sexual violence**
- **A continuum of participation**
- **Discussion: mainstreaming children’s participation in your context**

Participation v Participation

- Participation is a very annoying word
 - Active and passive understandings – rally example
 - Case example: academic conference
 - Concept Note defined participation from one partner but never discussed or agreed by both
 - Learning: initial exploratory phase needed

Men and Adults first...

- Links to previous point, part of building a participatory culture
- Importance of preparatory activities with adult key stakeholders before activities with children begin
- Example: UN consultation on VAC – all adults (from a key note address to all delegates to briefings for security staff at the venue). Worked with NGOs for 6 months before Under 18 Delegates selected.

Pick a child...any child

- Case example: European Institution to consult school children instead of children affected by sexual violence
- Children's expertise is their **experience** – Experts by Experience
- Learning: children feel stupid (just as anyone would) because they have no relevant life experience or expertise on the subject matter.
- Case example: Representation UN VAC consultation
- Children should represent more than their own views on a subject and be mandated by their peers

...and involve them in everything.

- It is not usually appropriate to involve children in all activities
- Example: Tanzania - training on mainstreaming children's participation
 - Had to give teacher training example to explain
- Learning: if you can't find the right children don't do it

Protection v Participation

- Protection rights (risk aversion) usually overrule participation rights (empowerment)
- Children who might be perceived as 'difficult' – are routinely disbelieved, ignored, silenced and blamed.
- Children are often seen as either 'victims' or 'agents of change', but rarely both.
- 'victims' – are often not included in decisions about their own needs and futures, or discussions about how to help or improve responses for others.
- Providing spaces and opportunities for these children to exert control and to be heard are critical.
- There is increasing experience working with children as 'experts by experience' in decision-making processes.
- Requires a shift from deficit based to strength-based models

“...the primary concern is about protecting [them] from society rather than considering the opportunities for them to participate in it”

Afua Twam Danso, 2005

Therapeutic impact of participatory activities

- Ending impunity through silence: abuse flourishes in silence the very act of enabling children to participate challenges this culture of silence...
- building children's capacity to protect themselves
- improving knowledge of children's lives
- enhancing skills and confidence
- enhancing children's understanding of the right to protection

“Before I saw what I had been through as a weakness – a horrible part of my life. Well it is still a horrible part but now I can use my experiences for good..... I’ve gone from the person who is coming here to ask for help for me, to someone who’s coming to help other young people.”

Maisy, 18, in AYPH Be Healthy, 2013

Common Ethical Dilemmas

- Too Risky! People don't even attempt to involve children affected by sexual violence as they assume it's too risky.
 - Example: CJ's involvement in UK consultation
 - Learning: IC involves young people in risk assessments
- Stereotypes, bias and discrimination about sexual violence
 - Example: scoping of participatory research on sexual violence -
 - Learning: briefing for key stakeholders (including children and young people)

Common Ethical Dilemmas – cont'd

- **Topic too sensitive: sexual violence is a taboo in many places.** There are issues related to stigma by association with any activity on sexual violence – but particularly advocacy activities. There may be resistance or repercussions from family, friends or at community level to children.
- **Children don't 'behave' as victims:** Children who have been marginalised, abused or ignored by professionals are (often) rightfully angry. Children's behaviours and styles of communication may reflect this and they may not be the easiest group to engage with.
- We need to understand this as important 'non verbal expression' and in the context of what has happened to these children (experiences of betrayal, loss of control) . It often takes time for children to trust again.

The bigger picture

- Investing in participatory work
 - Why? To be 'closer to the ground' – many agencies are interested in empowerment of marginalised groups, they see participatory approach as proof of this.
 - After Trump/Brexit there is a focus on funding social change and movement building – participatory approaches fit into this new focus.
 - Participatory activities are said to add to the 'impact' of a project – this needs unpicking
 - Children's participation needs to be at the heart of the organisation (not an add on just for funder) – mainstreaming participation
 - Lack of children's participation in advocacy activities or policy reform
 - Lack of formal structures within funders organisations to be able to assess level/type of participation activities encountered – due diligence

Standards on Children's Participation

- **Standard 1: An ethical approach: transparency, honesty and accountability.** Adult organisations and workers are committed to ethical participatory practice and to the primacy of children's best interests.
- **Standard 2: Children's participation is relevant and voluntary.** Children participate in processes and address issues that affect them – either directly or indirectly – and have the choice as to whether to participate or not.
- **Standard 3: A child-friendly enabling environment.** Children experience a safe, welcoming and encouraging environment for their participation.
- **Standard 4: Equality of opportunity.** Child participation work challenges and does not reinforce existing patterns of discrimination and exclusion. It encourages those groups of children who typically suffer discrimination and who are often excluded from activities to be involved in participatory processes.

Standards on Children's Participation cont'd

- **Standard 5: Staff are effective and confident.** Adult staff and managers involved in supporting/facilitating children's participation are trained and supported to do their jobs to a high standard.
- **Standard 6: Participation promotes the safety and protection of children.** Child protection policies and procedures form an essential part of participatory work with children.
- **Standard 7: Ensuring follow-up and evaluation.** Respect for children's involvement is indicated by a commitment to provide feedback and/or follow-up and to evaluate the quality and impact of children's participation.

Continuum of Participation

CONSULTATIVE

- Adults seek children and young people's views and perspectives to build knowledge and understanding of children and young people's lives and experiences. It is an adult-initiated and led process that values children and young people's perspectives and offers them opportunities for influence

COLLABORATIVE

- Adults work in varying degrees of partnership with children and young people as collaborators. Opportunities are created for children and young people to take active roles influencing the design and processes of projects and sharing decision-making. Projects remain adult initiated although their early development may be informed by children and young people.

CHILD-LED

- Opportunities and resources enable children to initiate their own projects groups and activities. Processes are owned and led by children and young people, although adults may be invited to facilitate and support them with aspects of their work.

Discussion: mainstreaming children's participation

- **The bigger picture: Why are you doing this?**
- **How do you define children's participation in your context?**
- **Who needs convincing that it's worthwhile doing (who needs to agree to your definition of participation)?**
- **Which children should be involved?**
- **Which activities should children to be involved in (and which should they not be involved in)?**
- **What different types of children's participation can you accommodate (consultative, collaborative, child-led)?**
- **What are the key risks and how can you overcome them?**
- **How could you overcome the ethical dilemmas? (these may be the same as the risks)**