Creating a Step Change in Monitoring and Evaluating Children's Participation

An update on a global pilot

Save the Children, UNICEF, WorldVision, Plan International, Concerned for Working Children

November 2012

A year ago, we posted on CRIN an introduction to an 18 month pilot being undertaken to test out a framework and tools designed to monitor and evaluate children's participation, and to invite potentially interested organisation to take part in the initiative. Now, six months into the process, we want to update you on the progress we have made so far and the learning to date.

Background

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need for better approaches to monitoring and evaluating children's participation. And the potential for improved monitoring has been strengthened by the adoption of CRC General Comment No.12, the Right of the Child to be Heard, which provides new clarity in elaborating the scope of A12 and how governments are expected to implement it. Further guidance is provided in the accompanying resource guide, Every Child's Right to be Heard published by Save the Children/UNICEF, September 2011.

Of course, as a fundamental human right, the opportunity to be listened to and taken seriously must not be contingent on evidence as to effective outcomes. States Parties in ratifying the CRC have committed to the realisation of the right to be heard for every child capable of forming a view, and on all matters of concern to them. However, there is a powerful case for more rigorous measurement of what is being done to give effect to the right embodied in Article 12 of the CRC. Through the development of clearer indicators and benchmarks against which to chart children's participation, it will be possible to:

- define the legislative and policy environment needed to promote and respect children's right to participation
- enable children to gain a greater understanding of what they hope to achieve,
- assess the strengths and weaknesses of initiatives and the quality of the participation process
- identify what support and resources are needed to strengthen children's participation
- provide evidence to support the case for political commitment to the realisation of children's participation rights.

In September 2011, Save the Children, UNICEF, Plan International, World Vision and Concerned for Working Children, supported by funding from the Oak Foundation, launched a pilot study to test out a new conceptual framework, supported by a toolkit, for monitoring and evaluating children's participation.

The materials being piloted

We are piloting a conceptual framework, elaborated through a series of matrices, to facilitate monitoring and evaluating children's participation. The ***framework*** falls into two discrete but linked parts:

- **Benchmarks or standards** against which to measure the extent to which child participation has been institutionalised at the national and local level – whether the necessary legislative, policy, social and cultural changes have been made. It can be used to help determine priorities for advocacy in building a culture of respect for children's right to express views and be taken seriously.
- **Benchmarks or standards** against which to measure the actual experience of participation:
  - **Scope** - what degree of participation has been achieved and at what stages of programme development - in other words – **What is being done?**

- **Quality** - to what extent have participatory processes complied with the agreed standards for effective practice – in other words – **How is it being done?**
- **Outcome** - what has been the outcome – on young people themselves, on families, on the supporting agency, and on the wider realisation of young people's rights within families, local communities and at local and national governmental level – in other words – **What has been achieved?**

This is supported by a ***toolkit*** which provides detailed guidance on how to undertake monitoring and evaluation involving children and young people, and suggested strategies and activities that can be used for collecting and analysing the data with children and adults.

The pilot process

Projects which encompassed a strong focus on children's participation from 12 countries were selected to participate in the pilot: Zambia, Ghana, Somalia, Burundi, Senegal, Nepal, India, Nigeria, Vietnam, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. Many of these projects are focused on child protection (protection from early marriage, sexual exploitation and/or economic exploitation, safe schools), while others are more focused on children's citizenship rights (enhancing opportunities for children's participation in community, local governance or municipal decision making). Representatives from each project participated in a workshop in Nairobi in June 2011 to learn about the materials, and agree the process and timetable for the pilot. They committed to test out the framework and toolkit over an 18 month period to provide feedback and guidance on their value and the changes needed to improve their accessibility, usefulness and practicality. The pilot also provided those projects with an opportunity to monitor and evaluate their own practice. All the materials were available in English, French and Spanish.

In addition, we invited interested organisations to become associate projects and participate in the process although not provided with financial support. Projects from Ecuador, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, India, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Paraguay, Sierra Leone and the USA expressed interest. These projects encompass a range of sectors including: child protection, education, health.

Key findings to date

Over the summer we requested that the participating organisations submit a six month report on their experiences so far. The key findings are:

1 Children's involvement in the process

The active involvement of children themselves in the process of piloting the materials was essential. In practice we have found that all the projects have successfully involved children in the management of the initiative as well as the M&E itself. It has become evident that children are able to engage effectively in the process, provided that the basic requirements for quality participation are adequately respected, for example, adequate time, appropriate adaptation of the tools for their age and level of understanding, and on-going support. All of the projects who reported had invested in training for the children to facilitate their involvement. In relation to the specificities of the children who have been involved, we found that:

- There was a fairly even gender balance of participation
- Children from between 9-17 years have been involved
- Many initiatives have actively engaged children from marginalised communities – working children, indigenous children, children without parental care, poor children. However, there has been relatively little evidence of active engagement of children with disabilities

2 Adult engagement in the process

The importance of active engagement of adults is vital to the successful implementation of the pilot and indeed, for effective and sustainable children's participation. The different partners in the initiative have engaged a wide range of different adult stakeholders - parents, local government officials, religious leaders, community mayors, teachers, employers, representatives of CBOs, PTAs, and head of Child Protection Committees. There has been a mixed experience as to the extent of willingness of adults to engage in the process.

3 Monitoring the scope of participation

The framework provides a matrix for assessing both the point of engagement of children in any initiative (situation analysis, planning, programme design, implementation and M&E). This is then assessed as to whether that participation is consultative, collaborative or child initiated. Tools are provided to enable this data to be collected and analysed.

The pilot has highlighted that:

- Monitoring the scope of participation has been challenging. Participation, by its very nature, is a fluid and organic process in which the nature of children's involvement is not constant or fixed. Assessing the extent of their engagement has therefore proven difficult, at times, to quantify.
- The language and concepts for assessing the scope of participation are also challenging for children. However, individual projects have been able to adapt them to render them relevant to the local context, and once the children do understand, both they and the staff, in a number of projects, have found the approach to evaluating their participation extremely helpful.
- The scope framework needs an additional dimension in order to reflect which children are participating – for example, girls or boys, ages, from which communities, and whether or not children with disabilities are included.
- CECESMA in Nicaragua observed that the term '*participacion protagonica'* in Spanish correlates with the language of '*child led participation'* in the framework. They are therefore substituting that terminology.
- The focus of the scope matrix was limited to children's participation in projects, programmes or initiatives, and needed to be adapted to enable the measurement of on-going participation by children in their day to day lives

4 Monitoring quality of participation

The framework uses the basic requirements listed in the CRC General Comment No.12, the Right of the Child to be Heard, as the basis for assessing ethical and meaningful participation. The benchmarks against which they are then measured are elaborated in the publication, *Every Child's Right to be Heard,* (Save the Children/UNICEF, 2011). A number of useful lessons are emerging as to how to evaluate quality participation:

- A number of projects highlighted the confusion that can arise over the relationship between the CRC basic requirements and the Save the Children practice standards for quality participation. They are inevitably very similar, as the practice standards provided the foundation for the CRC basic requirements. However, there are slight differences. Given that the General Comment will hopefully be used by governments and civil society as the definitive guide on implementing child participation, it is probably useful for the future for this standard to be adopted.
- Again some young children found the concepts embodied in the basic requirements difficult to understand – for example, respectful, inclusive, relevant, transparent. Many projects explored ways of rendering them more accessible, and some developed additional tools to facilitate this process.

- The quality of participation can vary across the stages of the programme. For example, there might be very effective participation in the implementation process, but far poorer quality at other stages. This needs to be measured, but does make the process more time-consuming and complex.

5 Monitoring outcomes

The framework provides for monitoring two levels of outcomes

- ***Process outcomes*** which examine the impact of the programme on children themselves, attitudes among families, staff and the wider community
- ***Structural outcomes*** which examine whether children's participation has contributed to any external goals – for example, legal or policy reform, changes in practice, community action, budgetary allocations.

Overall, the participating projects felt that 6 months was too soon to be able to demonstrate significant outcomes. They also felt that there needed to be more work done to develop specific tools to help capture outcomes. There was a lack of clarity within some projects are to whether they were seeking to measure children's participation as such, or the extent to which programme objectives had been achieved. The materials need to be clear that they are intended to measure the scope, quality and outcomes of participation, and the inter-relationship of the three dimensions.

6 The application of the tools

The toolkit provides detailed guidance on how to undertake M&E and suggests tools and methodologies that can be used for gathering the necessary information with children and adults. The feedback to date on their application is that nearly all of the tools have been used and have been found valuable and practical. Furthermore, they have provided a means of enabling children to participate in ways that are not confrontational with adults and have therefore been effective in engaging adult support. However, it is clear that:

- They need to be translated into local languages to render them accessible to children.
- They need to be adapted to reflect the local context.
- Different versions might be needed for children of different ages. Although many of the tools would be easily adapted for use with children with sensory and physical disabilities, more work is needed to render them accessible to younger children and children with learning disabilities.
- More visual tools would be valuable (including using puppets with younger children).
- Many projects have locally developed tools which need to be added to the toolkit in order that a wider audience can benefit from the accumulated experience of projects on the ground.
- It would be helpful to differentiate between generic tools for information gathering such as focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires, and specific tools for particular activities such as body mapping or the pots and beans exercise.

7 The importance of documentation

All participating projects have affirmed the importance of rigorous documentation of the process. They have employed a broad range of systems including: diaries, logs, books, notepads, ICT, worksheets, charts, spreadsheets, photo documentation, meeting notes, self appraisal sheets, questionnaires, a dedicated pilot book, flip charts, and folders of activities.

8 Summary of key outcomes to date

Although we are only 6 months into the pilot as yet, it has already achieved a number of important outcomes:

- Carrying out a situation analysis in measuring the scope of children's participation helped to clearly and carefully ascertain the extent at which children were involved/ not involved, consulted, collaborators or supported to initiate or manage programmes. After carefully analyzing the scope of children's participation, it became apparent that children were not involved in matters that directly affect them especially at programme development, design and monitoring and evaluation. These findings have informed efforts to gather children's views to inform the 2013-2015 Strategy (**WV Zambia**).
- The application of the framework has strengthened understanding of what meaningful participation involves, improved the quality of participation, enhanced children's leadership skills, improved understanding of M&E and heightened interest in the importance of participation, effective monitoring and further use of the framework and tools (**AMCWY, COCDITOS and Plan Guatemala)**
- Documents have been translated into local languages (**NCN, Save Children Nepal, Plan Togo**)
- It has encouraged the engagement of additional adult partners to support participation (**COCDITOS**)
- A self appraisal tool has been developed to enable children themselves to undertake the assessment. This is currently only available in Spanish, but an English version will be produced when we publish the final version of the framework and tools (**CECESMA).**
- Children's active engagement in the process led to changes in the M&E plan itself - more focused on monitoring participation rather than project indicators **(Save Nepal)**
- It has led to greater involvement of younger children in internal training, and resulted in the involvement of children in local carnival planning **(AMCWY)**
- It has led to some concrete external outcomes – for example, pro-active efforts to challenge the local community to make a stone quarry safe **(CWC)**
- Children used the matrices for mapping participation rights. They undertook an analysis of their community using observations, focus groups, drawing and discussions. The results were shared with community leaders who were impressed with both the quality of the process and the findings. The results were submitted report to CRC in Geneva **(WV Ghana):**

9 Key learning points

A number of important learning points are already emerging from the pilot, for example:

- Integrating M&E into the organisational structures has strengthened buy in and broad ownership of the process.
- Translation and adaption of the tools to the local cultural context is needed in order to reflect:
  - how childhood is understood
  - use of appropriate language
  - tools that reflect local realities.
- It is essential that there is sufficient commitment to ensure the necessary investment of time, planning and resources if the quality of the data collection and analysis is to be meaningful.
- Gathering baseline data is essential if real changes are to be identified – it is necessary to build time into the process to ensure that this is done effectively.
- The framework highlights some important challenges in monitoring participation:
  - It has been effective in helping conceptualise and evaluate scope, although adaptations are needed to ensure relevance to the local context and the employment of language accessible to children;
  - There are challenges in evaluating quality but through the adaptation and development of local tools this has proved possible;

- The framework is an effective tool through which to gather evidence on benefits of participation to children themselves, and on changing attitudes of adults;
- It will take more time to demonstrate links between participation and external outcomes.
- Measuring external outcomes will always be challenging as it is difficult to attribute the causes of change. There will always be many contributory factors which are relevant to any change of legislation, policy, budgetary commitment, service provision, professional practice or attitudes towards children.
- Indicators against which to measure outcomes of child participation need to be realistic and to reflect the importance of achievements capable of being reached in the short as well as longer term.

- Investment in the creation of a clear, participatory and transparent process, with adequate on-going support for children, is vital and pays dividends.
- Evidence emerging is that:
  - Adult exposure to children's participation can be transformatory in terms of both deepened awareness of the capacities of children, and the insights it affords them of the realities of and children's own perspectives on their lives.
  - Although the involvement of adults is key, it is also important to create and retain a strong child-centred focus on the process.
  - Many adults need support in building the skills in both listening to children, and learning how to ask questions.
  - Adults need to, not only engage with children, but also be prepared to be associated with their agendas and concerns.

Conclusion

The pilot has already begun to elicit invaluable information and understanding. This process will continue until the projects complete their work in April/May next year. We will then bring all the participants together to share their findings, on the basis of which we will revise the framework and toolkit, and publish it as a resource available for any organisation wishing to use it. We are also hoping to establish a digital hub through a website which will make available the materials and through which individual and organisations can share experiences, research, evaluation findings, and documentation. In this way, it is anticipated that the potential for strengthening monitoring and evaluation of child participation will be significantly enhanced, providing the resources through which to improve practice, as well as building a body of evidence on the associated outcomes.

Gerison Lansdown

For more information

- Hannah Mehta for general information on the pilot: h.mehta@savethechildren.org.uk
- Gerison Lansdown for information on the framework: gerison.lansdown@gmail.com
- Claire O'Kane for information on the toolkit: claireokane2008@gmail.com