

Child-led organisations and the role of adult professionals: a quest for dialogue

Written contribution to Working Group 9: “Child-led organisations: listened to and taken seriously?”

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Introduction

Child participation should be the new social contract in our way of viewing children.¹ Child participation as a concept has its legal basis in article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)², the first paragraph of which affirms: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” Supporting the establishment of child-led organisations on the community level can be one of many approaches of realising article 12.³ However, it is one thing for child-led organisations simply to exist, but it is a completely different thing to develop them into platforms for meaningful child participation. Also, the role of adults in relation to these organisations needs to be critically scrutinised. This paper discusses how child-led organisations can offer a platform for meaningful participation for children in the communities. It further looks into the risks attached to the relationship between child-led organisations and adult professionals supporting the organisations.

A certain child-led group⁴, the name of which is not mentioned with regard to reasons of child protection, will be used in the paper as an example of a child-led organisation on the community level.⁵ Consisting of some 35 children and youth from 13 to 18 years of age,⁶ the group⁷ promotes children's rights mainly on the local level and in their own communities. In this paper, the human rights law, academic discourse and recent interpretations by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee)⁸ on child participation and child-led organisations will be mirrored with reflections on child participation by members of the child-led group in question.

A child-led group's responses to Hart's ladder of participation

Since the establishment of the child-led group in question, its members have on a yearly basis evaluated their level of participation with the help of Roger Hart's ladder of participation. In the evaluation at the end of each year of

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child, Day of General Discussion on the Right of the Child to be heard, 2006.

² The CRC (1577 UNTS 3) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989 and entered into force on 20 September 1990. In November 2009 the 20th anniversary of the CRC is hence celebrated.

³ CRC Committee, General Comment No. 12 (2009) The right of the child to be heard, CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 128.

⁴ The author has chosen to call the group namely a group instead of an organisation, as it is a child-led body within a community development organisation. In the view of the author, the group fulfils the central criteria for a child-led organisation, namely that it is child-centred and works on the basis of children's initiatives. Although it is loosely attached to a the community development organisation in what comes to budget and programme framework, the group works next to independently from the mother organisation and sets and realises its own goals.

⁵ The goal of the group's establishment in the first years of the 21st century was to create a body for child participation and representation within the community development organisation to which it is attached. The group's form of organisation, mission and tasks were decided upon by a preparation group consisting of ten children and youth below eighteen years of age, with the intention that the body would be child-led from the very beginning of the planning phase. Since then, the main objectives of the group have been to bring children's voices to the organisation's staff, to raise awareness on children's rights among children and youth within their country, to do advocacy on the issues of children's rights and child participation towards decision-makers as well as to participate in a dialogue on these issues with child and youth groups around the world.

⁶ In using this group as an example, the discussion on ”child-led organisations” will focus largely on the age group of adolescents who are still under 18 years. However, when talking about children and children's rights in general, the author of this paper uses the definition of article 1 of the CRC: “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years”.

⁷ The CRC Committee reaffirmed in its recent General Comment on the right to be heard that the right is not only a right for individual children but also a right for groups of children. See CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 9.

⁸ The CRC Committee is the body of independent experts that monitoring the implementation of the CRC by its States parties.

activity, the ladder has proved to be a good tool for thinking back at how the group has functioned in its realisation and promotion of child participation.⁹

In the ladder of participation, Hart identifies eight levels of children's and young people's participation.¹⁰ The three first levels are levels of non-participation. The first level, manipulation, refers to situations where the children involved have no understanding of the issues concerned and, consequently, do not understand their actions. Another situation of manipulation would be that children are consulted on a certain topic, but not given any feedback at all. The second level, decoration, refers to situations when children for instance wear a t-shirt with a certain message decided upon by adults, without the message having been explained to the children. Here, the children might have the function of attracting sympathy for the specific cause. The third level, tokenism, refers to instances in which children are apparently given a voice but in fact have no or little choice about the subject or about the style of communicating it, and no or little opportunity to formulate their own opinions. Characteristic for these three levels is that they are patronising; they are projects which are entirely designed and ran by adults, with children merely acting out predetermined roles.¹¹

Although these levels of non-participation involve children to a certain extent, they are not child participatory¹² in the sense of being implementations of CRC article 12 on the right of the child to be heard. This interpretation was recently pronounced by the CRC Committee, which urges States parties “to avoid tokenistic approaches, which limit children’s expression of views, or which allow children to be heard, but fail to give their views due weight. [The Committee emphasises] that adult manipulation of children, placing children in situations where they are told what they can say, or exposing children to risk of harm through participation are not ethical practices and cannot be understood as implementing article 12.”¹³

There are two points in Hart's ladder of participation which require special attention in the context of this paper. The first one is the fact that the first three levels are not child participation, but the opposite. Hart's three levels of non-participation are emphasised here as to point out the flip side of child participation. Unfortunately, there seem to be more instances of tokenism and other forms of non-participation than there are genuine forms of children's participation.¹⁴ It tends to be a certain professional flaw for people working with children to think that every action involving children fulfil the noble intentions of child participation. This is not the case. Manipulation, decoration or tokenism should never be mixed with factual child participation.

The other important point in this context refers to the mentioned child-led group's responses to Hart's ladder of

⁹ The level of participation of each member has also been evaluated in the self-evaluation form, but here the focus will be on the participation of the whole group as the focus lies on child-led organisations instead of individual children.

¹⁰ Hart 1992: 8. The metaphor of a ladder, i.e., progressive increase in the level of participation, is adapted in Hart's ladder of participation to reflect children's participation from Sherry Amstein's essay on adult participation (1969). The ladder is found as an annex to this paper.

¹¹ Hart 1992: 9.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 132. This urge is part of the basic requirements for the implementation of the right of the child to be heard stated out in the General Comment.

¹⁴ Hart 1992: 9.

participation. Levels four to eight on Hart's ladder represent levels of progressively increasing participation.¹⁵ What is interesting about these levels of participation is the order of the two highest levels. Level seven, representing the next highest level of child participation, is called "child-initiated and directed". It gives all responsibility to the children themselves without making any reference to adult support or facilitation. Level eight, representing the highest and ideal level of child participation, is called "child-initiated, shared decisions with adults", making a clear reference to the role of adults in being part of the decision-making. In other words, according to Hart, the ideal level of child participation is not one when all decisions are made by children alone, but instead when decision-making is shared with adults. This could be interpreted to be a patronising conclusion as such, drawn by an adult who does not believe that children have the capacity to make decisions without the help of adults.

When the members of the child-led group in question evaluated their participation in the spring of 2009¹⁶ on the basis of Hart's ladder, the group felt as an average that they are now on level seven: as for now, their activities are child-initiated and directed. When they asked themselves on what level they would like to be, the message was clear: the group as a whole felt that the ideal would be to achieve level eight where the activities are initiated by children, but the decision-making is shared with adults. It is interesting to note that the child-led group's impression of child participation at its best correlates with that of Hart's: the group found that the ideal level of participation is not when children autonomously make the decisions without any involvement of adults. Rather, the group preferred shared decision-making.¹⁷

It should be pointed out that the question here was about the group's impression of child participation and decision-making in general, as a concept. When looking particularly into different kinds of decisions that are made in relation to this specific child-led group, the group seemed to be most interested in making decisions related to concrete activities carried out in their communities, where they felt that they can make a change. Examples of these kinds of decisions included: to decide on practicalities attached to the organisation of meetings; to plan campaign topics or events in the communities; or to draft advocacy letters to local decision-makers. There was almost no interest in taking part in decisions on budget, partnerships or other topics that felt remote and that were further away from the children's own every day life,¹⁸ although they were "matters affecting"¹⁹ the children involved and their organisation. From this example it can be drawn that the membership in a child-led organisation can be a way of realising article 12 of the CRC at least to an extent where the organisation's members feel a relevance in the decisions made, where the decisions made have clear connections and implications on the

¹⁵ Hart 1992: 8. Level 4: children involved in the project are assigned but informed; level 5: children involved are consulted and informed; level 6: the project in question is adult-initiated, with shared decision-making with children; level 7: all actions are child-initiated and directed; level 8: the project in question is child-initiated, with shared decision-making with adults.

¹⁶ In this paper, only the outcome of the 2009 evaluation will be used. It would naturally be interesting to compare results from different years with each other, but that would be a whole other discussion of that specific group's development and it is not the task for this paper to explore this aspect.

¹⁷ Naturally, these results cannot be generalised into the opinion of children in general and not even into the opinion of adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age, and it is not the intent of the author to this generalisation. However, it does give an impression of one child-led group's ideas about child participation and its correlation with Hart's ladder of participation.

¹⁸ This correlates with characteristics on effective and genuine participation identified by Lansdown (2001: 11). Among other characteristics, he says that projects have to be linked to children's day-to-day experiences in order to be effective.

¹⁹ Article 12 of the CRC: "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, [...]"

involved children's lives. The example further makes one question whether it is at all relevant to burden child-led organisations with decisions concerning for instance budget or other issues alike, perhaps with far-reaching consequences which the children might not be able to influence afterwards, although they would be matters affecting the children.

Child-led organisations as a platform for meaningful child participation

Article 12 of the CRC does not mention meaningful participation; it does not state that the right to be heard should be meaningful for the child. It does, however, state that child has the right to express his or her views freely.²⁰ The word “freely” can be understood as referring to meaningful participation. In the recent General Comment on the right of the child to be heard, the CRC Committee has interpreted “freely” to mean that the child must not be manipulated or subjected to undue influence or pressure when expressing his or her views.²¹ The expression of views is hence not meaningful if the child were manipulated or subjected to undue influence or pressure when expressing his or her views.

The interpretation that participation shall be meaningful for children was stated out in the outcome document of the UN General Assembly's special session “A world fit for children” in 2002, where States parties promised “to develop and implement programmes to promote meaningful participation by children, including adolescents, in decision-making processes [...]”.²² The broad interpretation of child participation in this soft-law document has now been reaffirmed by the CRC Committee. With specific reference to child-led organisations, the Committee states that “[c]hildren should be supported and encouraged to form their own child-led organisations and initiatives, which will create space for meaningful participation and representation.”²³ Although both documents cited here are legally non-binding, they put pressure on States Parties to understand child participation broadly, and to ensure that participation is meaningful for the child. The CRC Committee further urges that child participation is to be understood as a process, not as an individual one-off event. This statement supports the argument that child-led organisations are an important way of realising article 12, as it can be safely said that the membership and participation in such organisations usually build upon long-term engagement involving the child's own and the group's development.²⁴

Children's right to freedom of peaceful assembly²⁵ establishes the right for children to be active collectively in their own communities and elsewhere. Children realising their right to meet together by creating or joining child-led organisations must be listened to and taken seriously if the participation is to be meaningful for the children.²⁶

²⁰ The word “freely” implies that the right to be heard is namely a right, not an obligation, and that it is voluntary for the child to exercise this right.

²¹ CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 22.

²² A World Fit For Children, 2002, A/RES/S-27/2, 11 October 2002, para. 32.1.

²³ CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 128.

²⁴ In the child-led group used as a point of reference in this paper, most members have a membership span of two-three years, depending on their age when they become members, their situation at school and other factors related to their life situation. When the members turn 18, they can no longer be members with, for instance, the right to vote in the decision-making, but they are encouraged to become tutor members.

²⁵ This right is recognised for all human beings in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (999 UNTS 171; adopted 16 December 1966, in force 23 March 1976, 999 UNTS 171) article 21, but was reaffirmed specifically for children in article 15 of the CRC.

²⁶ The forming of child-led organisations as a forum for meaningful participation is a realisation of children's right to

However, as was touched upon in the previous section on Hart's ladder of participation, it seems to be equally important that the child-led organisations are supported and facilitated by adults. Adults have the responsibility to provide appropriate direction and guidance to children they are responsible for, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.²⁷ And although the adult support should transform, in correlation with the development of the child's own capacities, from "direction and guidance into reminders and advice and later to an exchange on an equal footing",²⁸ children will need some sort of adult support or guidance as long as they are legally under aged and in many circumstances even after that.²⁹ The example of the child-led group in question shows that adult support is desired in order for the participation to feel real and meaningful for the children involved. This argument is supported by research on child participation carried out in different parts of the world.³⁰ During its almost ten years of existence, the child-led group in question has transformed from being merely child participative, in the sense that adults create the possibility for children to be active parts of decision-making, towards a child-led, self-advocating body with adults only playing a supporting and facilitating role. The group now functions quite independently and self-sufficiently.³¹ The wish for adult support has nevertheless not decreased throughout the years.

Too often the supportive role of adult professionals seems, however, difficult to achieve. The line between adult support on the one hand and tokenism, decoration or manipulation on the other hand is extremely thin and, often enough, blurred. There is a constant risk that the child-led organisations become clichés and scenes for adults to fulfil their own, perhaps hidden, purposes and agendas. The CRC's guiding principle of the best interest of the child³² is relevant in this context. When adult professionals are supporting child-led organisations, it is crucial to make sure that the children themselves feel that their actions are carried out on their terms and in their own best

freedom of peaceful assembly, which is strongly linked with the realisation of the right of the child to be heard. It is surprising to note, however, that in the recent General Comment on the right of the child to be heard, the CRC Committee does not make any linkage between these two articles although the interrelation between article 12 and other rights are discussed in paras. 68-85. The list of interlinks in the General Comment is apparently not exhaustive and does not need to be either; as a general principle, article 12 is a component in realising all rights of the child. See CRC Committee General Comment No. 5 on the General measures of implementation for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC/GC/2003/5) of 3 October 2003, para. 12.

²⁷ Article 5 of the CRC.

²⁸ CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 84.

²⁹ As is said by Lansdown (2001: 1): "Article 12 requires us to question the nature of adult responsibilities towards children. Recognising that children have rights does not mean that adults no longer have responsibilities towards children. On the contrary, children cannot and should not be left alone to fight the battles necessary to achieve respect for their rights. What is implied by the Convention, and its philosophy of respect for the dignity of children, is that adults need to learn to work more closely in collaboration with children to help them articulate their lives, to develop strategies for change and exercise their rights.

³⁰ For instance, in the regional consultations for the UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence against children, young people from East Asia and the Pacific seek dialogue with different stakeholders for the combating of violence in the communities: "There is a Chinese saying, 'Gu Cheung Lan Ming', which means 'no sound can be made if only one hand claps'. We, children, are one hand. Adults are the other hand. The community is one hand. The Government is one hand... We strongly believe that a community with peace, love and unity can be built if we work together for the future!" See A/61/211, 29 August 2006, section C.

³¹ Lansdown 2001: 16. Lansdown identifies three categories into which meaningful approaches to involve children can be broadly grouped: consultative processes; participative initiatives; and promotion of self-advocacy. In this categorisation, the aim of participative initiatives are to strengthen processes of democracy, create opportunities for children to understand and apply democratic principles or involve children in the development of services and policies that impact them. The aim of promotion of self-advocacy, on the other hand, is to empower children to identify and fulfil their own goals and initiatives. Naturally, the boundaries between the categories are everything but clear-cut, and the focus can shift between the different categories depending on the group dynamics and the nature of the project carried out.

³² Article 3 of the CRC.

interest. Adult professionals tend to take for granted that they know what is in the best interest of children, often without even asking the children concerned: “[c]ommonly, as far as adults are concerned, the projects are in the best interest of children, but they are manipulative nevertheless.”³³ To avoid this kind of a false perception of the child's best interest, training on child participation is needed, preferably with children involved as trainers and facilitators. As is stated by the CRC Committee, adult professionals working with child-led organisations need preparation, skills and support to facilitate children's participation effectively and to provide them, for example, with skills in listening and in working jointly with children.³⁴ States parties to the CRC should not only support such trainings, but also take positive measures to provide trainings to professionals: “It is one of the core obligations of States parties to the CRC to provide training on article 12, and its application in practice, for all professionals working with, and for, children.”³⁵

Child participation through child-led organisations: dialogue, not rebellion

For as long as child participation has been on the agenda, negative comments against it have been raised; voices saying that children's participation and empowerment lead to “pupil/child power”, “children divorcing their parents” or an “anti-family movement”.³⁶ As the CRC promotes child participation, it has been criticised for being nothing more than UNICEF propaganda that imposes unquestioning acceptance of UN policies.³⁷

One can find many reasons for why child participation is so strongly questioned, most of them having to do with traditionally hierarchical societal structures where children are not seen as subjects of rights but rather as citizens of tomorrow:³⁸ future human beings who are to be disciplined, instructed and corrected. Children's views are often silenced with the motivation that they are naïve, unstructured or seem ridiculously inexperienced; we tap children on the head and say that “you will understand better when you grow up”.³⁹ Most importantly, child participation has caused negative reactions because in giving a voice to children, adults feel a threat towards their own authority. But as a Belgian child has so correctly stated, child participation is not about making the child the boss.⁴⁰ Instead, it is about giving children a voice in matters affecting themselves and about seeing them as full fledged members of the society they live in.

It seems that those who oppose child participation see the participation and non-participation of children as two opposite poles: one extreme is that children are not listened to at all (i.e. adult power), the other extreme is to give

³³ Hart 1992: 9.

³⁴ CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 134, which states out the basic requirements for all processes in which a child or children are heard and participate.

³⁵ CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 49.

³⁶ For detailed discussion on this topic, see for instance David, 2002: 55.

³⁷ In saying this, Howe & Covell have cited Steel. See Howe & Covell, 2005: 5.

³⁸ Among others, Pronk has stated that “children [...] are the next generation”, in which he fails to see children as active rights holders already as children, see Pronk, 1996: 12. This message was also given in the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children, 1990: para. 3.

³⁹ Naturally children have different abilities to express their views, depending on their age and level of development. But the bottom line is that all children can express their views in their own way. All ways of expression must be recognised for a full implementation of article 12 of the CRC. The CRC Committee emphasised this is the recent General Comment on the right of the child to be heard: “full implementation of article 12 requires recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences. See CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009, para. 21.

⁴⁰ The child was cited in Cattrijsse & Delens-Ravier, 2006: 34.

children autonomy and self-determination in any possible matter (i.e. child power).⁴¹ The idea with child participation is, however, not to oppose children with adults: it is not a question of a bipolar division. Children's active participation in society does not make adult authority or participation weaker.⁴² Instead, children's and adolescents' views give an added value to societal debate and decision-making,⁴³ especially on the community level.

Article 12 of the CRC does not talk about dialogue or cooperation; it talks about the child's right to be heard. In this, it leaves open the role adults' participation in relation to this right.⁴⁴ Perhaps child participation would not be regarded as a such a threat by many if the article would emphasise the aspect of dialogue. Since the adoption of the CRC, dialogue and cooperation have been emphasised when the meaning of article 12 has been explored.⁴⁵ But it could be argued that if we want to overcome the prejudices and threats linked to child participation, the emphasis on dialogue must be even stronger, not only among high-level experts, but also in policy-making and in the work of professionals with children in the communities.

Children do not want autonomy. Rather, they wish for dialogue and to be seen as the subjects of rights they are. If dialogue between child-led organisations and adults supporting them is to be reached on the community level, each stakeholder has to take responsibility for the process. Firstly, the child-led organisations themselves must clearly point out their wish for dialogue and constantly seek for ways to create space for this dialogue. Alongside rights come responsibilities, also when it comes to children. Secondly, it is the task of the adult professionals supporting the organisations and being subjected to the organisations' actions to take the organisations seriously and invite them to cooperative dialogue on relevant issues on equal terms, no patronising allowed. Lastly, it is the obligation of States parties to the CRC to support and encourage the dialogue between child-led organisations and adult professionals for instance through the active provision of training on the complex issue of child participation both to children and adults involved. It will be interesting to see how States parties react to these obligations stated out by the Committee, as there is no sanction for not fulfilling the obligations.

Conclusion

Child-led organisations are on a quest for dialogue. In opposition to what many adults seem to think, most children do not wish for rebellion in their realisation of the right to participate and be heard. Instead, they wish to be taken

⁴¹ Archard et. al., 2006: viii. In this context it is important to emphasise that article 12 of the CRC does not give children the right to autonomy or self-determination. See e.g. Lansdown 2001: 2. When talking about empowerment of children, a clear distinction must be made between "empowerment" and "having power over". Empowering children is not about handing over the authority and the power from adults to children; it is about enabling children to critical thinking and to take positive action in favour of children's rights. See Conley & Ettinger, 1998: 33.

⁴² Of course, many communities are characterised by structures that make even adult participation difficult, not to mention participation of minorities or poor and excluded people. The debate on community participation in general falls, however, outside of the scope of this paper.

⁴³ Among others, MacKinnon says that postponing children's and young people's participation can even be destructive, both for the child itself and for society, as it might lead to social passivism and a feeling of exclusion. See MacKinnon, 2001.

⁴⁴ All articles in the CRC are interlinked and interdependent, and the role of adults is emphasised in other articles, e.g. article 5. However, the argument here is that article 12 in itself could benefit from having a stronger emphasis on dialogue.

⁴⁵ For instance, the CRC Committee called for the right of the child to be realised in a cooperative manner on the Day of General Discussion on the right of the child to be heard, 2006. Also the recent General Comment on the topic makes a call for dialogue. Among academics, the interpretations of article 12 have also had a strong emphasis on dialogue. See e.g. Cattrijsse and Delens-Ravier, 2006.

seriously in the decision-making together and on equal terms with adults in the spirit of dialogue. Using Hart's ladder of participation as a tool, the example of the child-led group discussed in this paper shows that children demand to be part of decision-making especially when the topics decided upon are of clear relevance for the children's every-day life. And according to recent interpretations of article 12 of the CRC by the CRC Committee, they have the right to demand it.

The threat related to the quest for dialogue is that the principle of the best interest of the child is forgotten: when striving for balanced dialogue, there is a risk that the balance shifts over and that the child-led organisations become platforms for adult professionals' hidden agendas and, consequently, clichés of child participation. The possibility, on the other hand, lies in adult professionals acknowledging the threat of these clichés, and constantly working against them.

Unfortunately we are not yet on the stage of genuine dialogue, not even within the professional children's rights field. All too often we still choose a patronising attitude when communicating with children, consciously or not. We still tend to think that it is us adult professionals who know what is *really* in the best interest of the children we work with. For adult professionals working with children, step one in reaching genuine dialogue is therefore to overcome these prevailing, patronising attitudes towards children. In our daily communication with children in general and child-led organisations in particular, we have to get over our arrogance as adults and start treating the children around us as the full fledged rights holders they are, and nothing less.

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