1.0 Background
Plan is a child rights-based organisation working in 62 countries. Plan makes long-term commitments to support child-centred and rights-based community development programs in Africa, Latin America and Asia, which are linked to development education and advocacy activity in the South and the North. Plan’s work this year will positively impact on the lives of around 13 million people worldwide.

This paper is submitted in response to the Committee’s invitation to provide written contributions to the 2006 Day of General Discussion on the Child’s Right to be Heard. It is submitted for consideration under the theme ‘Children as active participants in society’ and focuses specifically on the child’s right to express their view and to be heard in the media.¹

Through improved technologies and new developments, the use of media has increased significantly in the last decade, providing opportunities for better access to information and increased knowledge among people in our societies. These advances enable greater child and youth participation in the media, and therefore in society as a whole in terms of informing, supporting and influencing not only their peers, but adults too. Despite these opportunities to improve, parts of the media continue to exploit children and to contain stereotyped descriptions of children and their situations. However, by involving children, the media can improve and Plan therefore believes there is an urgent need to increase child participation in the media.

1.1 Child media programs at Plan
Plan currently operates child media programs in over 30 developing countries and in a number of developed countries. These programs are development projects introducing children and media makers to the production of high quality material relevant and appropriate to children and the promotion of their rights. This can be in radio, video, print, online or via other forms of communication media. Child media projects should be understood as an evolving concept, or a spectrum of increasing levels of child participation. Projects can range from low levels of participation, for example where children act as interviewees, through participation in adult facilitated media activities in which children learn to produce and disseminate information through creative media; to projects where children initiate and manage their own media activities and productions. While different levels of child participation might be adequate in different circumstances and should develop over time, Plan promotes the highest level of child participation, taking into consideration their evolving capacities and safety.

2.0 Children and the media
The significance of the relationship between children and the media is recognised within

- Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets out the role of State Parties in ensuring children’s right to express their views freely in all matters relating to them and for those views to be listened to;

- Article 13 of the Convention which sets out the right of the child to freedom of expression through the media of their choice; and

¹ Media is defined as: television, radio, print media, video, photography, the theatre, CDs and the internet
- Article 17 of the Convention which declares that it is the responsibility of State Parties to make sure that children have access to information from a diversity of national and international sources. For the mass media, this means providing information of social and cultural benefit to the child.

The media has great potential to make the principles and standards of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) a reality by realising children’s rights to appropriate information and freedom of expression; by creating awareness about the Convention and its content and by playing a pivotal role in monitoring its implementation. Yet research by the Media Monitoring Project (2004) shows that children tend to be seriously under-represented in the media. As one child commented in a media-monitoring exercise:

“The news made me feel left out. It’s like children don’t exist”

When children’s stories do make the headlines, it is usually not about issues that are relevant to children’s lives, but those that are dramatic and extreme. Indeed, the Media Wise Trust (2005) claims that a large proportion of media coverage on children is negative; “if they are not victims, tearaways or child soldiers, they are invisible”. In extreme cases, children may even have their rights violated by the media, despite the fact that a number of organisations have voluntarily agreed to follow guidelines to ensure ethical standards in reporting.

3.0 What do children think about participation in the media?

When Plan asked a group of child journalists why their participation in the media is important, they responded that:
- It provides them with the opportunity to learn about their rights and responsibilities and ensures that they are accurately represented
- It allows them to exercise their right to participate and express themselves freely and ensures that their priorities and concerns are well reflected
- It allows them a voice through which to educate and claim their rights from parents, communities and government
- It brings children together and is a vehicle through which they can inform their peers about what is happening in their lives
- It helps them to address sensitive issues without being afraid or punished, to seek help and learn avoidance strategies (for instance, how to protect them against rights abuses such as trafficking)

4.0 What mechanisms can be created to foster meaningful participation of children in media?

Plan’s own experience of facilitating the participation of children in the media has demonstrated that children are capable of creating media, exploring child rights issues, working out solutions and becoming advocates for the defence of their own rights. Slowly, parents and other adults are starting to change their attitudes about children’s participation in media and to value children as agents of change in communities. The following good practice examples illustrate how participation can be done in a meaningful fashion:

4.1 Good Practice for stimulating inclusion of children and their issues in the media

---

5 For instance, the International Federation of Journalists has adopted a set of guidelines and principles for reporting on issues involving children.
6 Albania, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo, Sierra Leone, The Philippines and Togo (in Bamako, Mali, 4-8 June 2006)
In 2002 Plan Haiti and The Panos Institute Washington launched a national journalism prize for best reporting on child rights issues. The initiative resulted not only in an increased production of high quality reporting on children and their rights, but also motivated media owners and journalists to listen more to children.

Plan Togo launched a similar project in June 2006 with NGO partner WAO Afrique, establishing the “Dzitri” price for media institutions and journalists for high quality reporting on children and their rights. Members of the jury for the annual award are child journalists participating in Plan Togo’s children and media program. The initiative will be strengthened by media training on child rights reporting and international media guidelines.

4.2 Good Practice for mainstreaming children’s concerns into “adult” media
In Zambia, Plan supports the local youth organisation, Youth Media, to train adolescents in journalism and to work with them to integrate their work into the published and broadcast product of the main media companies. As a result the child journalists are producing media relevant to both adolescents and adults.

4.3 Good Practice for media monitoring
The Panos Institute West Africa has developed the first teaching guide for students on critical reading of media in West Africa, piloted in Senegal. In partnership with Panos and Plan Togo, this experience is currently being expanded to include critical analysis of all media forms for children in and out of school.

5.0 Positive impacts of media programs made with and for children
Evaluations of Plan media projects demonstrate the many positive impacts resulting from children’s participation in the media.

5.1 Improved media product
Not only does the involvement of media professionals in child media often result in more media for children, it can also result in better quality media made for and with children:

A number of radio stations involved with Plan’s “I’m a child but I have my rights too!” project have increased programming for children (often because of the strong demand from listeners). Evaluations demonstrate an increase in capacity, both in the production of higher quality programmes and in the involvement of children in the process. There is also an increase in their awareness and knowledge of children’s rights and about the situation of children in their country.

5.2 Generating change
Children’s participation in the media can influence policy makers at the governmental level:

The ‘Children have something to say’ project facilitated by Plan in India involves young people creating films and animations about a range of issues that affect their lives. One film was about addiction to gutka (a mixture of tobacco, beetle nut and lime). The film inspired students to such an extent that they undertook a petition to stop it being sold in shops located near their schools. They took their demands to the district government who banned gutka from all schools in the district and who initiated a massive awareness-raising campaign in collaboration with the students.

Child media projects can also result in more child-friendly communities that respect children’s rights and opinions:

Another film in the ‘Children have something to say’ project is about the story of Rabia, an 8 year old girl, working in extremely difficult conditions at Delhi’s largest rubbish dump. The audience watched the film in silence. For many villagers it was as though a situation that had existed for so long had never before been seen as a problem.

In Guinea Bissau, 12 year old Genoria has a disability caused by polio and her mother ‘never had the idea to send her to school’ until she heard other children on the radio in the “I am a child but I
“I’m a child but I have my rights too!” is an awareness-raising campaign on the rights of the child which has been broadcast in West Africa since 1999 on radio stations in Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal and Togo. After hearing Plan's story on female genital cutting some girls in Guinea approached their teacher and asked her to talk to their parents about
the issue. After discussing the girls' concerns, their parents agreed that genital cutting was not right for their children.

As a result of their participation in media, children feel valued and can gain self-confidence. This is a result of discovering their own talents and receiving the recognition of adults and their peers. The sense of being useful in a community can also lead children to become active in other domains and can empower them to take on new roles and responsibilities:

“Joining in the Bidang Bulilit children’s radio program has made me into a child leader in my school and community. My lack of self-confidence was overcome. Now I can express my views and opinions during community council meetings” (Emer, 15, Philippines)

Young people in the media create role models and can inspire other children to participate themselves, and to find other ways to make their voices heard:

“Everyone listens to the radio show. Children are highly motivated to participate and parents are proud to hear their children on the radio”
(Program Unit Manager, Plan Togo)

Through their experiences, child participants can pass on their skills to their peers and communities.

In order to ensure that all children benefit from the opportunities provided, media programs must ensure that they include children in vulnerable and marginalized situations:

The ‘Tarang’ magazine project was set up by Plan India in 1999. Children’s involvement in the production of material for the magazine is based on teamwork and the participation of children from marginalized groups is actively encouraged.

6.0 Challenges and obstacles to children’s meaningful participation in the media

The CRC Committee once stated “Childhood is not life’s waiting-room”.

Although approximately one-third of the world’s population is made up of young people under the age of 18, the media rarely reflects the opinion or realities of this group. Overall, both in North and South, the media provides limited opportunity for children to exercise both their right to participate in the media and their right to express their views in matters that affect them. There has been inadequate emphasis on the need for children's meaningful participation at every level of the media, including media monitoring and children’s participation in the media has not yet received the priority attention it deserves.

Plan’s recent Youth Media Forum (4-8 June, 2006) in Bamako, Mali demonstrated the sheer number of organizations working to facilitate children’s participation in the media. However, it is clear that there remain a number of common challenges to facilitating children’s participation.

6.1 Social attitudes and resistance to child participation

The media is most often controlled by adults who do not always want to give up their power and allow children to set the agenda. On the other hand, parents themselves also do not understand the value of children’s inputs. Parents often believe that media projects are too time consuming and will make children unmotivated in school. However, evidence demonstrates that children’s performance in school often improves as a result of their participation:

In Bangladesh, Plan facilitates children’s participation in a weekly show called ‘Agami’ (Future) that is broadcast on national television. A mid-term evaluation of Agami showed that parents think participating children are more interested in their education because of the program.

---

7 Slovakia’s 1R, para 240
There can be reluctance among parents to allow their children to learn about child rights. This is because rights are often perceived to be in conflict with the tradition in many countries that children do not question or even address adults unless they are told to do so. Parents fear that certain messages will make children ‘rebel’ and become impolite and disrespectful:

“Sometimes parents think we want to know better than them and make us leave...Sometimes the community misinterpret an idea and contradict our suggestions”
(Child Journalist Responses, Mali)

It is important that such attitudes are addressed through information and sensitisation of the media sector and parents.

6.2 Ethical and protection issues

In West Africa, there have been examples of cases where desperate children have sought the help of the radio stations that broadcast the Plan campaign. In Benin, a young girl was brought to one station bleeding heavily the day after her grandmother had given her away in marriage to a much older man.

The information given in the media should include advice to children on how to address issues such as abuse, and where to seek help (for example, signposting to helplines and other services).

In our drive to increase child participation in the media, we must also ensure the protection of children from the media. For example, media exposure of children who have suffered abuse often constitutes secondary abuse, due to the potential for victimisation if a child’s identity is revealed. Just like adult journalists, child journalists can sometimes fail to protect the other children that they are working with:

The ‘Children have something to say’ project in India made a film that depicted a 7 year old girl who is abused and exploited by her family. An animation technique was used to protect the girl’s identity. However, following the first community screening, the father of the real ‘Shabana’ was present and the local people recognised that the story was about his daughter. The youth evaluators were told that ‘she got a scolding’ from her father.

Commercialisation, violence, sexual pressure, gender stereotypes and other harmful influences can narrow children’s opportunities to participate in the media. In many parts of the world a vast number of shows and programs (for example on TV) do not reflect the real lives of children and young people. Plan’s consultations with children, and evidence from research, reveal that children do not want to be exposed to these kinds of programs and negative images. In order to protect children from harmful influences and negative images they must play a full part in the process, to produce media that provides high quality information and entertainment which reflects their real lives and does not violate their rights.

6.3 Little investment and lack of resources

It is crucial that media produced by children is provided with adequate resources to ensure access, inclusivity and quality. Children’s media ‘competes’ with the other media products worldwide, if it wants to be taken seriously and have the potential to reach the largest audience, it needs to offer the same high quality. Children alone cannot reach that high quality without the assistance of media professionals:

“I’m a child but I have my rights too!” has emphasised the production of quality programs to promote the rights of the child. As one actor explained “It has to be done well, otherwise people will dismiss the whole campaign as something done by children and nothing to care about”. However, quality production has to be balanced with ensuring genuine and well-facilitated child participation.
Children’s capacity to participate in the media is not always understood and acknowledged by adults:

“Nobody is perfect and sometimes we make mistakes”
(Child journalist response, Mali)

In addition, many children are unable to access media such as television and radio due to lack of resources.

6.4 The need to develop skills
Children, as well as many adults, are not always aware of their right to free expression. They are often shy and have difficulties expressing themselves when they are not used to doing so. Without media training, children may be afraid to speak out in case they give the wrong message or are unable to express how they think and feel. Illiterate children, disabled children and other marginalised groups of children sometimes need specialist facilitation to enable them to participate fully.

7.0 Conclusions
High quality child media projects are an essential instrument to realise children’s rights to be heard and to participate in society. Media programs provide a vehicle for raising awareness of child rights and the CRC; they can improve the quality of media products for children; generate change; ensure children’s holistic development and promote active citizenship by ensuring development in essential life skills such as communication, problem solving, negotiation, conflict resolution and advocacy.

Media is a tool to raise the voices of the most vulnerable. When media programs respect the standards and principles of the CRC it can change adults’ perception of children by showing good role models; it can publicly raise issues such as violence, which are usually difficult to discuss; and can challenge adult behaviour.

Children’s participation in the media is dependant on having the opportunity to speak as well as having a relevant audience that listens. In countries where the technology allows for children to take the initiative, for example by creating their own web-pages, the challenge is to prevent children’s voices and concerns from drowning in the wealth of information. Society must include children’s opinions and create space for children in the media.
Annex 1

Recommendations

1. Media for children must involve children in all phases of production, from conception to final product. In doing so, those producing media need to respect the right to non-discrimination and inclusion by making efforts to include children across age groups, gender and social situations.

2. Media for adults must include the voices of children when addressing issues pertaining to children, and when a children's perspective on any given issue is relevant.

3. Children must receive training and resources to participate in media, both through opportunities for vocational media training and through activities in school and in communities, and in terms of producing a high quality product capable of reaching a wide audience. The subject of ‘media’ needs to be integrated into the school curriculum.

4. The media sector must increasingly be sensitised and informed, and must take responsibility for informing itself, about children's rights to express themselves be heard and participate, and the sector should be enabled to use the guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights Child’s to shape its work.

5. In light of the standards set in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, media must be systematically monitored and evaluated by both adult and child groups and the findings from must result in active follow-up by relevant actors.
Annex 2

Global Context

A number of global meetings on children and the media have recognised the importance of children’s participation in this area. These include:

- The Day of General Discussion on ‘The Child and the Media’ by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Switzerland, 1995): “The media is important for offering children the possibility of expressing themselves. One of the principles of the Convention is that the views of children be heard and given due respect...children should not only be able to consume information material but also to participate themselves in the media”

- The Oslo Challenge Workshop (Norway, 1999): “The challenge to children and young people is to find ways to promote their own active participation in the media and in media development; the challenge to parents, teachers and researchers is to acknowledge and support the rights of children to have access to media, participate in it and use it as a tool for their advancement”

- 3rd World Summit on Media for Children (Greece, 2001): which ‘encouraged the participation of children in the planning and production of media programming’

- 4th World Summit on Media for Children and Adolescents (Brazil, 2004): where adults proposed that ‘media production with the participation of children and adolescents should be promoted; and children proposed that; ‘children and adolescents have guaranteed space in the production and transmission of media products’


Annex 3

Bibliography

McNeill, S & Brazeau, M (2003) ‘Children have something to Say Video Project in India’
Plan West Africa (2005) ‘I am a Child but I have my Rights too!’
Plan Sweden (2006) ‘Children in Media’
Plan Norway (2006) Youth Consultation on access and obstacles to meaningful participation in the media
Plan (2006) ‘Summary of Questionnaire Responses on Child Participation in the Media’