World Vision International’s Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Day of General Discussion:

To Speak, Participate and Decide – The Child’s Right to Be Heard

September 15, 2006
I. Introduction

Children are often seen, but not heard. At one level, some view the concept of child participation as naive, because they perceive that children lack the capacity to be involved in important decisions. On another level, others believe that children should be left to enjoy their childhood, without the need to be burdened with the concerns of the world. Yet, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), children have a right to participate and play an active role in decisions that affect them. Moreover, experience has shown that the voices of children are crucial to the development process – within families, communities, and at the national and international levels. Without a specific focus on children, we risk missing the issues that matter to them. We also often fail to recognize the important roles that children themselves play in the development of their communities.

In this paper, World Vision (WV) will highlight the right of all children to participate as active citizens in society, through consideration of Articles 12, 13, and 15 of the CRC. Specific attention will be given to the rights of children to participate in political processes, the promotion of peace, and in research. Case studies will be used to illustrate concrete examples of children as active citizens, and to highlight the main obstacles that currently prevent children’s voices from being heard in each of these arenas. Detailed recommendations to address these obstacles will be identified in Annex 1, specifically relating to the need to:

1. promote awareness-raising for adults to address prejudices toward children;
2. facilitate spaces for children to develop their own ideas and opinions;
3. ensure that participatory processes for children are inclusive and accessible for all;
4. ensure that participatory processes do not victimize or re-victimize children;
5. incorporate participatory approaches that include children in conflict-resolution mechanisms.

II. Children as active participants in society

II.1 Children as active participants in political processes

WV is actively committed to promoting the rights of children to participate in political processes, in order to enable children to influence the laws, policies, and programmes that directly impact their lives. Moreover, WV also recognizes the need to foster children’s capacity to be active citizens, to strengthen their enjoyment of their rights during their childhood, and as they reach adulthood. Particular attention is given to the rights of all children to participate, with an emphasis placed on the participation of those who tend to be the most marginalized. One effective way to achieve this is through the creation and facilitation of children’s groups to work for the promotion and securing of the rights of the child.

In Bolivia, WV is expressly committed to:

Contributing toward the practice of a citizenship culture among the children (boys, girls and adolescents) from rural and indigenous communities so that they can participate actively in their communities and in the political decisions of the country; exercising their right to participate and to freely express themselves regarding issues that interest them.

To accomplish this, WV Bolivia facilitates activities directed at forming, strengthening, and supporting children’s and adolescents’ community-based organizations. Such organizations promote the rights and responsibilities of children with families, communities, government organizations, and other institutions. Through these activities, both boys and girls become catalysts for the promotion and defence of their
own rights in their communities and with the state. Moreover, together with the Social and Political Commission of the Bolivian Parliament and a number of other NGOs, WV is seeking to facilitate the representation and participation of children in the national Legislative Assembly in two ways. First, through the National Congress of Children and Adolescents, which brings together children and adolescents from different sectors and social groups from the nine regions of Bolivia to discuss issues and produce recommendations to go before the Bolivian Parliament. Second, through the Children’s and Adolescent’s National Parliament, which has provided children with the opportunity to propose drafts of national laws, and to present requests through written reports that will be passed to the Social and Political Commission of the Parliament for its response.

In so doing, children are able to identify their own concerns and find potential solutions, and suggest proposals for policies and actions that will benefit all of the country’s children and adolescents. Additionally, because a number of participants are drawn from rural areas and indigenous communities, particular attention has been given to issues affecting those children who are most marginalized and impoverished.

Participation of children in these processes is supported through workshops where they are taught about the procedures of the Legislative Assembly, the use of formal chamber methods, the election of representatives, and the generation of proposals at departmental and national levels.

In 2003, the Bolivian Children’s and Adolescent’s Parliament presented a draft bill concerning children’s right to proper identification/registration, expressing that the Bolivian state should provide birth certificates, free of charge, to all the children and adolescents of the country. Based on this proposal, on December 18, 2003, the Bolivian state passed Law 2616, which establishes the mechanism necessary for the registration of children and adolescents through the National Civil Register.

WV has found that programmes aimed at empowering young people but which may not be specifically focus on facilitating their participation in the political arena can nevertheless lead to young people becoming engaged with political processes.

In the Philippines, a WV project to provide libraries and small income-generating initiatives to young people, in partnership with the local youth council, led to the organization of children’s associations by the youth involved. These organizations actively promoted children’s rights and spearheaded children’s initiatives in the community. Through the barangay (village) children’s associations, a child representative sits as a member of the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC). BCPCs are responsible for monitoring the situation of children in the barangay and for facilitating the realization of their rights.

WV and other child-focused organizations have also provided venues for children to express their views and raise issues and concerns that need immediate attention. The opinions of children are heard during the Children’s Summit, leadership trainings, and the municipal-wide local congress. The children are also exposed to various activities designed to foster their potential, teach them how to eliminate their prejudices, as well as understand and engage in community participation. Involvement in different children’s activities and initiatives helps them develop a sense of courage and self-confidence. As they are exposed to the challenges faced by their peers in their neighbourhood and see the suffering of other children, they are often moved to call on local leaders to respond.
Many of the children in the municipality work as jeepney (public bus) fare collectors or sell plastic grocery bags in the markets to help earn an income for their families. Several of these children have stopped their schooling and hang out on the streets, where some are often prone to street accidents, forced to work with pickpockets, and are at risk for substance abuse. In response to the challenges facing these children, a few of the leaders of the children’s association lobbied the Municipal Council for the Protection of Children. The politicians made many promises during election time, but none of the promises were ever realized.

Despite their disappointment, the children did not give up; they began an awareness campaign on children’s rights. If the government would not heed their call, they thought, at least parents might learn to recognize and respect their children’s rights, and the children would also know about their rights. Strategies were carefully employed to call on the attention of parents by conducting house-to-house visits, as well as holding informal talks and meetings. These actions resulted in the parents developing a trust toward the young leaders. Furthermore, the parents began to support their children participating in community associations. The community’s long-held notion that children “are just children, dependent on their elders,” has gradually shifted toward a more positive view of young people.

The Philippine case study provides useful insight into some of the challenges facing child participation in the political process. Child leaders primarily identify poverty as the main obstacle to their participation. Instead of joining activities, children are frequently preoccupied with helping their parents earn money for daily subsistence. Additionally, children are often forced to work or look after their younger siblings while their parents are away; attending school is relegated to a lesser priority. Another obstacle is the lack of information on children’s rights, and the negative attitudes of parents and adults toward children. When parents themselves have not completed school, they often tend to not value education for their children. Moreover, the lack of legal norms implemented in the Philippines is also a contributing factor. Several legislative acts concerning the welfare and well-being of children are not translated into action. When legislation is implemented, there are occasions when it is done simply as a matter of course, not out of a genuine concern for children. Thus, issues such as poverty, child labour, child abuse, and prejudices toward children act as barriers to the children’s ability to fully enjoy their right to participate.

II.II Children as active participants in the promotion of peace

A child’s right to express his or her views, as stipulated in Articles 12 and 13 of the CRC, are actively promoted by WV’s Children as Peace-builders (CAP) programmes. WV has numerous CAP programmes around the world, both at the national and regional levels. One notable example is the East Africa CAP initiative, which includes projects in Northern Uganda, the North Rift region of Kenya, the Tonj Counties of Southern Sudan, and the Bualle and Waajid districts of Somalia.

Children’s participation is encouraged through music, dance, drama, and sports, in order to increase the interaction between conflicting communities and to convey peace-promoting messages to various target audiences. Depending on their age, maturity, and capacity, older children also express their views through essay-writing competitions and debates on the theme of peace. Children also speak about their experiences to raise awareness in the communities where they are being integrated and to call on the government to take action to end the conflicts that affect them. The activities provide opportunities for children to express their concerns on peace- and conflict-related issues, and to propose solutions. They can also recommend ways to promote peace and influence policies, traditions, cultures, and practices.

As spelled out in Article 15, children participate in peace-building activities both individually and with others, in association with peace and child-rights’ clubs in their schools and communities. This is done through empowerment processes, whereby adults such as teachers, club patrons, and WV staff facilitate
opportunities with children to raise awareness about issues relating to peace and conflict, children’s rights and responsibilities, as well as to provide information and enhance their peace skills and attitudes.

In the context of these initiatives, the child’s right to express his or her views implies that they should be listened to and their views be taken into account in processes for peace, conflict management, and reconciliation. This has proven to be a challenge. These processes generally take place within the framework of classic conflict-resolution mechanisms managed by adult clan heads, traditional chiefs, and sometimes rigid, bureaucratic government officials. Because of cultures and traditions, these leaders often have negative attitudes toward children’s participation, believing strongly that children have nothing to contribute.

Article 12 also calls for children to form and express their views freely. As such, children should be supported to do so in a language they understand well and can best articulate themselves in; using various media that they are most comfortable with is also key. The implicit expectation that children participating in peace-promoting activities outside their immediate communities use the English language – which is not always their first language – often compromises this right, particularly when translators put their own words into children’s mouths.

Children must also be authentic and think through their involvement right from inception to the end. The misconception by adult facilitators that children are empty vessels, there to receive knowledge and instruction, has hampered children’s enjoyment of this right. Children are often not given the space to explore, form, and express what they know or want. The songs, dances, and dramas are often created with great influence by adults.

For every child to express his or her views, equal opportunities to participate should be available to both boys and girls. Even when boys and girls have limited opportunities to express themselves, girls are at more of a disadvantage. Traditionally, conflict resolution and peace-making are male domains. Also, girls often have less time than boys to participate in clubs because of the household chores they perform. Thus, there is a need to actively involve girls in peace-builder initiatives, especially in societies that continue to restrict their participation in various aspects of life. Communities, and specifically leaders and parents, should be targeted for gender awareness-raising. Children’s peace initiatives should empower girls, build their confidence, and help them overcome gender biases.

In addition to programmes on children and peace-building, WV has also been extensively involved in promoting children’s participation in addressing broader issues of violence against children, particularly through the UN Study on Violence Against Children. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean, WV, along with UN agencies and various NGOs in the region, formed a partnership to respond to the UN study, and established as its main objective the broad participation of children and adolescents.

In countries such as Colombia and Brazil, World Vision facilitated the consultation process, and intentionally promoted the inclusion of minority social groups. In Bogota, WV conducted the survey with severely disabled boys and girls. In Brazil, a focus group was conducted with children of ethnic minorities, contributing to a broader view on how violence is exerted and its effects on children in the region.

The consultation process revealed that girls and boys between the ages of nine and 12 have a clear understanding of violence, particularly as to how it is destroying the society in which they live. They expressed sadness and a lack desire to continue with life. The children distinguished between physical and emotional aggression, and identified those responsible for perpetrating violence against them.
Through these activities, it became clear that children should be provided with the tools and appropriate forums to validate their rights.

**II. III Children as active participants in research**

WV has increasingly supported children’s active participation in research, monitoring, and evaluation. It recognizes the importance of understanding children’s perspectives on the issues facing their communities, and the impact of programmes and policies on their lives. WV’s experience of involving children in research in Ghana highlights not only how children can meaningfully participate in researching issues that concern them, but also serves to illustrate how children tend to be excluded from everyday decision-making within their families and communities.

The project in Ghana was particularly influenced by Articles 12 and 13 of the CRC. In order to actualize these rights in the lives of children in our programmes, children were recruited as researchers and given the opportunity to share their findings with their peers and community members. Forty-five girls and boys ranging in age from 15 to 17 participated in the survey as researchers. The adolescents were part of a larger research team comprising community members, the consultant, WV staff, and adult representatives of institutions such as the Ghana Health Service, the Ghana National Commission on Children, the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, the National Commission on Civic Education.

Initially, the children joined the study as timid observers, but quickly blossomed into confident members of the research team. This research created the platform whereby Articles 12 and 13 of the CRC were realized in the lives of children living in 10 districts of Ghana. Furthermore, the project proved that when space and support are provided, children are not only interested and motivated to participate in research, but are capable of exercising their right to participate in a meaningful way as well.

While adults initiated the research project, a deliberate effort was made to involve children from the onset, beginning with their input as to the design of the questionnaire. On the first day of a meeting to review the draft questions prepared by the consultant, the children promptly observed that the questions were not suitable for young people, and highlighted those that were adult-specific. They recommended that a separate, child-friendly version of the questionnaire be created. The consultant then redesigned the questionnaire for adults, and produced a different version for children; the final questionnaires reflected the recommendations made by the children.

Because the researchers included children who had very limited knowledge of or experience in research, training sessions were organized to introduce them to the fundamental principles and standards of research. The challenge was ensuring that the materials were not overly academic and incomprehensible to the children. This was achieved, in part, by teaching the theories through drama and assessing the children’s level of comprehension through role-playing. They were fast learners and demonstrated the correct techniques for interviewing individuals, facilitating focus group discussions, and building trust for effective communication with interviewees.
During the field research, children interviewed and interacted with both adults and other children. They concluded that most children—themselves included—do not often have the opportunity to exercise their right to participate in decisions affecting them. The findings indicated that whereas 59 per cent of adults agreed that children do not participate in decision-making, as many as 76 per cent of the children interviewed said they were hardly ever consulted for their input into family or community decisions affecting them. Most of the adults attributed this attitude to their belief that children cannot make meaningful decisions. The children, on the other hand, said their parents know best and can decide for them.

The children also observed that parents had all the power in the household and, as such, they dared not challenge them. In one particular community, more than half (52 per cent) the adults said they always sought the opinion of their children in making decisions at the household level, whereas only 29 per cent of the children confirmed this claim. In fact, 71 per cent of the children said their parents never solicited their views when making household decisions. As to why parents do not seek children’s opinions, adults indicated that children were too young to give meaningful input. Children, however, said their parents feared they would divulge embarrassing family secrets if they were privy to family discussions and decision-making.

One key discovery from the research was that adults in the target communities were not strictly opposed to children’s participation; rather they believed that children had nothing to contribute. Fortunately, this perception can be changed through information, education, and communication.

This research project was a milestone in WV Ghana’s quest to ensure the well-being of children and their development as agents of change in their communities. The survey revealed that children are seldom involved in decision-making; this project has sought to reverse this trend by actively involving children throughout the process. As a result of this research, some local government authorities have resolved to enact bylaws to promote children’s rights in their districts and to reward communities that promote and enforce these rights. In most communities, the adult researchers were amazed at the children’s skilfulness and analytical abilities.

III. Conclusion

While many institutions, states, and organizations have accepted the notion that child participation is important within the contexts of society, democracy, and development, there is still a great deal of confusion as to what it means and how it can be achieved. Based on the case studies above, World Vision has identified a number of challenges that must be addressed if children are to secure their right to be active participants in society. WV is proposing five recommendations for the Committee to consider as a means to further the realization of the children’s right to participate as active members of society (See Annex I). Finally, WV wishes to encourage the Committee to continue to engage with NGOs in its efforts to ensure the full realization of the right of every child to speak, participate, decide, and be heard by developing better methods to facilitate children’s participation, and by identifying critical local, national, regional, and international institutions where mechanisms for Article 12 ought to be developed and implemented.

Annex I: Recommendations

Based on extensive programming and advocacy experience with children’s participation in a wide variety of country and thematic contexts, World Vision is providing input to the Committee on the Rights of the Child concerning children’s right to be heard and to be active participants in society. In particular, WV is proposing practical and strategic recommendations on specific issues and principal concerns to be studied further by the Committee, and that will help shape the drafting of General Comment on Article 12.
1. **Promote awareness-raising on children’s rights for parents and other adults.** To address prejudices toward children, and invest in skills-building for participatory processes, both with adults and children, ensuring that the methods are appropriate for the levels of maturity and capacity of the participants. Article 12 states that the child has a right to express his or her views “in all matters affecting the child.” With the majority of decisions affecting the child in the hands of non-State actors, such as parents, teachers, and community leaders, this Article has implications beyond the sphere of the State Party. As such, in order to ensure that Article 12 is upheld, all adults must be made aware of its existence and the obligations it confers on them. Moreover, given the crucial role of NGOs in developing methods to facilitate children’s participation, WV recommends that the Committee encourage greater cooperation between State Parties and NGOs to promote the application of this principle in all sectors.

2. **Facilitate spaces for children to develop their own ideas and opinions**, by providing access to appropriate information and forums where they can explore, form, and express their views freely. The directive of Article 12 to give “due weight” to the opinions of the child means that in all arenas where decision-making processes take place, structures and processes to capture the views of children must be introduced. This includes the need to systematically engage children in the review of existing legislation and policies and the development of new legal norms, as well as the development of strategies to ensure legal norms are implemented and enforced to protect the rights of children. For NGOs, it points to the need to engage children in every stage of the project lifecycle.

3. **Ensure that participatory processes for children are inclusive and accessible for all.** The children who participate should be representative of the broader population and should not be discriminated against on any basis. In particular, participatory processes should be designed to accommodate particularly marginalized children; for example, through the use of selection criteria that ensures diverse representation. Moreover, every effort should be made to enable the relaying of children’s messages in ways that do not compromise their authenticity. Wherever possible, children should be able to participate in a language or another medium that is most comfortable for them; if translation is required, then translators should be properly trained to accurately convey what the child has expressed.

4. **Ensure that participatory processes do not victimize children.** The opportunity to participate should be one that empowers children and adolescents, rather than one that further marginalizes them. Those responsible for facilitating children’s participation, particularly adults, have a duty to ensure that the necessary measures are in place to protect children from all forms of abuse and exploitation. This includes undertaking measures to protect children from persons who would wilfully inflict harm on them, as well as ensuring that the proper policies and measures are in place so children are not inadvertently exposed to harm.

5. **Incorporate participatory approaches that are child-inclusive in traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms.** Children’s perspectives should be part and parcel of decision-making and peace-building processes. WV recommends that the Committee encourage State Parties to ensure children’s participation in conflict-resolution processes as a matter of both policy and practice. Leaders should be targeted to raise their awareness of and change their attitudes about children’s rights and participation.
Annex II: Annotated Bibliography of Selected World Vision Reports Relating to Children’s Participation


This report documents the experiences of World Vision Australia (WVA) and World Vision Myanmar (WVM) in conducting a two-week “empowerment evaluation” of their Street Children and Working Children Program. Consistent with the main aim of Empowerment Evaluation, the key objective was to provide capacity for the project participants, especially the children, to evaluate and be involved with project decision-making.

The process allowed the children to be the primary evaluators. They spent time interviewing various stakeholders in the programme and analyzed the information gathered. Staff members reported being extremely surprised and impressed by the ability of the children to participate in this process and were moved by what they were able to learn. The evaluation was so successful, in fact, the project management team decided to expand the process to cover the mid-term evaluation for the entire Street and Working Children project.

Children at Risk: Practical Approaches to Addressing Child Protection Issues in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. WV International, 12 May 2003

Children at Risk is a follow-up to World Vision’s earlier study Crying Out: Children and Communities Speak on Abuse and Neglect, which revealed that children were being abused or neglected to an alarming extent and made recommendations to address this. The present report reflects a survey of WV’s and some other NGOs’ approaches to protecting children at risk in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. It identifies a range of practical programming and policy measures that are – or hold promise for – effectively addressing the abuse and neglect of children, and gives particular attention to the crucial role children can and should play in the realization of their own rights.


The main thrust of this research project was to highlight the need to listen to children in order to develop effective solutions to the problem of child labour. Children in this project, who live in India, Thailand, and the Philippines, told us that they want to work, that they play an active role in choosing the kind of work they do, and that their goal is to support their families. Whether they live at home in the country or on the street in large cities, children say they hope for good jobs, fear bad jobs, and struggle with difficult choices. They have strong, clear ideas about what kinds of work children should and should not be doing, and they deserve to be heard.

Strongim pikinini, strongim laef b’long famili: enabling children to reach their full potential. WV International, 1 October 2005.

This research seeks to listen and learn from communities, families, and children about how best to protect children from violence. This research started with the premise that there are both traditional and modern attitudes and actions in all communities that can empower and protect children. From the research perspective, the methodology was designed to not only discover the ways in which children were at risk of violence, but more particularly:

• to examine the positive ways in which communities support children, their parents, and other caregivers;

• to identify concrete examples of the resilience of children to such difficulties;
to seek ways to build upon the positive interactions children have with their families, broader community, and national bodies.

**Small Feet, Deep Prints Young People Building Peace with World Vision East Africa. WV Africa, May 2005.**

This publication documents lessons learned from involving children in working for peace. Children and youths in most of Africa lack support to share their ideas. WV’s work with children and youths in Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, and Uganda, as captured in this book, is a testimony that children and youths have a meaningful part to play in human transformation. This book, about WV’s milestones, learnings, and challenges, reflects on the inclusion of young people and makes recommendations for more meaningful and empowering ways to involve children in peace-building and conflict prevention.

**Child Participation: Challenges of Empowerment, Issue 9 Spring 2000, World Vision UK.**

The purpose of this discussion paper was to stimulate some debate about important issues relating to child participation. The paper combined articles that examined the issues from a legal as well as practical perspective with a view to helping move the discussion forward. The paper by the NGO Article 19 on the right to freedom of expression reviewed the framework provided by the CRC and the ways in which countries have chosen to interpret this right. In particular, it viewed the lack of clear jurisprudence as a critical issue and recommended better guidelines for the interpretation of the right to participate. An article by Mitchell Woolf looked at the wider implications of child participation both from a state’s point of view and from a developmental perspective. As a counterbalance to the academic contributions, the discussion paper included a contribution from children participating in a forum run by the European Forum on HIV and AIDS, Children and Families, and a strong case study from the Philippines that looks at the ways in which children are becoming involved in the democratic process, at both the community and national levels. There are also brief contributions from WV Cambodia and Tanzania, which have been actively seeking to include children within their programmes.

**Children and Peacebuilding: Experiences and Perspectives, World Vision Australia, September 2001.**

This report highlighted the notion that the right of children to participate actively must be the foundation of children’s involvement in peacemaking. Children are potentially among the most powerful of peace builders, and we should listen to them, learn from them, and support them in their endeavours. The report includes case studies from around the world – Uganda, the African Great Lakes, Colombia, the Balkans, Australia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and elsewhere – where children are challenging adults to resolve differences, confront the causes of conflict, and go forward in peace.