

CHILD PARTICIPATION IN THE AMERICAS



Organization of
American States



Inter American
Children's
Institute

Specialized Organization of the OAS

20 years after the adoption of the Convention on the **Rights of the Child**

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Prologue

The Inter-American Children's Institute is an OAS Specialized Organization. Over the course of 82 years of unceasing efforts it has cut across the Inter-American System as a thematic point of reference, adapting itself to the interpretation of changing scenarios and the different contexts and situations which surround children in the Americas.

The IIN has contributed with its professional expertise to the generation of technical instruments which enable Member States to develop improved actions in favour of the protection and promotion of children's rights.

It is the view of the Organization of American States that participation and democracy are two universal principles which are common to our times and to the fair and equitable societies to which the States in the region aspire. These principles are contained in the democratic ideology of the Inter-American Charter of the OAS, empowering each and every member of society to exercise his or her rights, covering the different aspects of individual situations, and also including other basic freedoms. Together with participation, democracy is perceived as an active agent and the framework of citizenship.

Within the setting of technical cooperation promoted by State policy, the Institute aims at present to achieve a leading role in the region. Through the administration of projects of strategic impact, a transformation of focus is sought which will promote a perspective based on rights. In this respect, special emphasis has been laid on encouraging the participation of children, as an articulating element in the exercise of human rights, the essential content and substance of the democratic system.

The exercise of participation underscores the opportunity to learn and to develop, to implement significant actions over time with noticeable effects on individuals, mainly with regard to issues such as identity and the sense of belonging.

Participation is following a trend which goes beyond the communication of feelings and opinions. It encompasses the interventions of those who listen and bear in mind content conveyed, enabling continuity and facilitating the use of appropriate means. A participatory relationship between adults and children, in its many senses, leads to citizens who take on a leading role in society, with a tendency to foster participation for all.

For participation to be relevant it is essential that it be cultivated in the areas closest to children: within families, schools and communities. When participation takes place and is exercised permanently in everyday settings, it becomes incorporated as an influential practice.

When both the State and the family foster child participation, they join efforts in actions of social responsibility. To participate is to build communities and citizenship; to take part in the decisions which build and breathe life into the State. Public policies as a whole must bear in mind the participation of individuals as an aspect of their success. Because of this, policies for children, being as they are the basis of social stability and the promoters of rule of law, should above all, endorse participation.

Twenty years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, this task has been included within a specific context in which the articles of this important binding treaty have permeated such important fields as legislation, policy, and the social and cultural life of the American States, indicating the boundaries of a paradigmatic before and after. In addition, the Inter-American Conventions on childhood have made it possible to establish our own scenarios, in which the decision to acknowledge children as full subjects of rights must now be reinforced. The role of full, conscious and active participation thus implies providing opportunities for children to be able to take possession of their rights.

Participation as a democratic principle for children to experience real and consistent citizenship is an urgent challenge to which we wish to respond. There are new challenges to confront every day, as well as new incorporations in the world, which make it necessary to update the way in which the role of children is addressed. We recognize that the

level of participatory inclusion of children in the life of the State can be improved and to the extent that this relationship – born within families and schools, which are a child's main settings – is successful, we shall be able to advance in the construction of the Rule of Law.

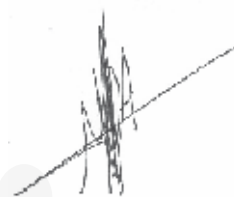
Two decades of promoting the well-being of children in the light of the Convention have given rise to a critical awareness in States and societies, and generated the transformation of approaches and doctrines in an action-reflection relationship which is rooted in practice. This refers to a transforming activity which leads to a global project of social relationships in order to interpret the family and communal realities of children.

The IIN, in accordance with the mandates of the States, represented by the Directing Council, has been charged with the development of a framework of reference. This document will attempt to define and organize theoretical-technical components which basically favour the construction of forms of knowledge and awareness which affect the daily dynamics with which institutions and actors associated with children promote child participation. The intention is for the actors involved to generate analyses, produce new knowledge, question their own initiatives and reflect upon them. The line of conceptual analysis which defines child participation attempts to set the boundaries between meaningful practice and merely discursive practice.

The strength of the methodology adopted in producing this material lies in the integration of several disciplines and the outcomes of different forums. Amongst these are the Inter-American Meeting on the exchange of experience and programmes for the care of children held in Querétaro, Mexico in April 2008, the Meeting of the Working Group for the preparatory consultation on child participation, held in Quito, Ecuador, on 5 and 6 February 2009, the activities, such as dialogue panels and conferences on participation, which were carried out during the Twentieth Pan American Child Congress, held in the city of Lima, Peru, in October 2009 and the First Pan American Child Forum which took place at the same time as the Congress.

In order to conclude the validation process with Member States, a Regional Participation Workshop and Second Working Group Meeting on Child Participation was held in Panama City in December 2009. This event made it possible to reach agreements with regard to certain conceptual issues in this paper, which includes the remarks and contributions made by participants, with particular emphasis on the definition of the term participation and the outlook of children from the perspective of this right.

It is our hope that the efforts carried out by the IIN in coordination with the Member States will be effectively reflected in the pages of this framework of reference. We shall thus have contributed to the development of new ways to enable the inclusion of child participation in the principal spheres of decision, within the construction of public policies for the children of the Americas.



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THEORETICAL-CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION

Introduction

In modern and current socio-political thought, the belief that democracy is a necessary, desirable and beneficial political system for human development has gained increasing ascendancy.

Notwithstanding, several thinkers have warned about the risks of viewing democracy as a system which has crystallized into perfection. It should, rather, be considered as a form of organizing society and regulating coexistence which is in a continuous process of consolidation and improvement through the practical radicalization of its basic values and principles.

One of these values is collective responsibility for public affairs. The belief that public management and State administration are the exclusive responsibility of a select group of citizens who dedicate themselves professionally to politics is deeply-rooted in our societies.

All other citizens are periodically convened in order to elect their rulers, but once the general population have elected their representatives, they wash their hands of existing problems and leave them to those in power. This feeling of indifference on the part of citizens with regard to public issues and problems constitutes a threat which weakens representative democracy.

This is why it is important to promote commitment amongst citizens with regard to collective concerns, the exercise of the right to information, to forming independent opinions, to self-expression and to active involvement in the identification and solution of problems.

Citizen participation is indissolubly associated with the consolidation and strengthening of democratic coexistence. At the same time, democracy thus understood transcends any specific form of government to become a way of life in which people, whatever their condition, involve their capabilities and capacity to form opinions, express them and contribute to the construction of collective solutions to common problems.

This capacity is exercised in different settings, from the most insignificant of daily practices to the broadest of public policy issues; from family to government, via community and institutional scenarios.

Democratic practices and participation thus transcend the political dimension and holistically involve human beings and their daily lives in all of their complexity. This includes feelings of belonging to a group, solidarity, self-acknowledgement as thinking beings with the capacity to understand, learn and contribute. At the same time, it implies recognizing the capacity, ability and rights of others; to be willing to listen and respect the opinions of others, even when they differ from one's own.

This has led us to maintain that, on the one hand, there is a subjectivity which is inherent to participatory policies and, on the other, that there are policies which give rise to subjectivity and favour or inhibit participation. The first refers to a sensitivity which acknowledges not only the legally consecrated right to participation for all, but also that participation is a distinctive trait of human beings; which values, and deems it necessary and desirable to bear in mind the opinions and contributions of all when devising solutions to collective problems and making decisions about them.

In addition, experiences in everyday settings, formal and non-formal education, the models and mandates which circulate in social areas, give rise to a kind of subjectivity which is based on the belief that the opinions of others are valuable, that personal fulfilment can only be achieved within a collective framework, which suffers the problems, or enjoys the achievements of those who share the same settings, which is involved in public concerns. Or, conversely, it perceives everyone else as a potential enemy, it is indifferent to public issues, and identifies with a concept of life in which achievements can only be conceived and obtained at an individual level.

In short, public issues either belong to all, or belong to nobody.

Participation is inherent to human beings as social and cultural beings, but despite this, it took humanity many centuries to acknowledge that everyone, without exception, has a right to participation.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, includes participation amongst its four guiding principles and recognizes the right of all people to take part in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their country. In its Article 19, it consecrates the right to “freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas...” For its part, Article 20 recognizes the right to “freedom of peaceful assembly and association”.

Since then, participation constitutes a basic human right which applies to all human beings “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”; therefore, it also applies to children.

Despite the seemingly evident fact that children, inasmuch as they are human beings, are included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the acknowledgement of their political rights and their right to freedom of expression still has a long way to go.

In 1959, eleven years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was proclaimed. This document came into being after a debate on the pertinence of having a declaration specifically devoted to children. It was based on the need to afford children special protection due to the fact that they must receive special care in view of their immaturity.

The perception of children as being subject to the discretion of adults is deeply rooted in our cultures. Their right to be looked after, fed, educated and cared for in illness is acknowledged, as are the responsibilities of adults in connection with those rights. However, children are viewed as passive beings whose role is merely to receive care; their rights to be informed, give opinions and take an active part in the processes which make up their lives, are ignored.

“The social rights of children have a long history and universal development (...); with regard to civil rights, concern is more recent and they are still subordinate to the discretion of adults, in asymmetrical relations of dependency and power. Political rights do not appear to apply to children; the prevailing idea is that, as they do not vote, children are non-political subjects. This is now being questioned, inasmuch as children are political beings who inhabit political societies, which implies levels of political participation which contribute to their civic training and the development of their interest in public matters” (Etchebehere, G. 2009).

When citizenship is referred to with relation to children, it is viewed as a concern for the ‘future’, in terms of education, the transfer of values and the provision of good models, in order for them to become good citizens when they reach adulthood.

This perhaps explains, at least in part, the fact that it was a full three decades after the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was proclaimed before the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In 1978, the government of Poland submitted a text to the United Nations in the expectation that it would enter into force the following year, for the celebration of the “International Year of the Child”. However, it took ten years of debate to achieve the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, on 20 November 1989. This Convention introduced a new paradigm in connection with children, defining them as subjects of rights and consecrating participation as one of its guiding principles.

In the CRC, participation is not mentioned as such, but appears as “the right to be heard”. Not only is this concept cross-sectionally included in all of the rights, becoming the focal point of the new paradigm, but several of the

in accordance with age and maturity..” It stresses the obligation of allowing children to be heard in all legal or administrative proceedings (CRC, 1989).

Article 13 reaffirms the right to freedom of expression, including the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds” and by any means.

Other articles stipulate the right to freedom of assembly and association (Art. 15); to freedom of thought and conscience (Art.14); to the consideration of their points of view in different social, family and educational situations (Articles 9, 16 and 29).

Although many of these rights were already included in the human rights declaration, the CRC introduced a new element by making them compulsory for all of the States which signed and ratified it. The States are guarantors of rights and must invest resources and design policies which lead to these rights becoming effective.

Within the framework of the Inter-American System, the Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), meeting in Lima, Peru, on 11 September 2001, adopted the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

This document reaffirms the fact that “the participatory nature of democracy in our countries in different aspects of public life contributes to the consolidation of democratic values and to freedom and solidarity in the Hemisphere.”

Another passage highlights the role of education as a way to “promote citizens’ awareness concerning their own countries and thereby achieve meaningful participation in the decision-making process...”

Several of its articles stress the relationship between participation and democracy: (OAS, 2001)

- “Representative democracy is strengthened and deepened by permanent, ethical, and responsible participation of the citizenry” (Art.2)
- “It is the right and responsibility of all citizens to participate in decisions relating to their own development. This is also a necessary condition for the full and effective exercise of democracy. Promoting and fostering diverse forms of participation strengthens democracy.” (Art. 6)

The participation of children is not expressly mentioned, although it does recognize “full and equal participation of women in the political structures of their countries as a fundamental element in the promotion and exercise of a democratic culture.” (Art. 28)

In recent years concern regarding the promotion and exercise of child participation in our continent has been voiced in different forums and events, both by the States and by civil society organizations

This paper is related to this process and its purpose is to construct a Framework of Reference which will enable the unification of concepts, methodology and indicators, on the basis of a review of existing documents, an analysis of practices – leading to reflection – and the systematization of the opinions and points of view of the participants themselves.

Background

The discussion and conceptualization of subjects related to child participation have traditionally been monopolized by adults.

It should be noted, however, that in this decade, forums and international meetings have been organized in which children and adolescents participate active and creatively in the production of concepts, methodology and recommendations for the States. This makes it possible to take significant steps towards the appropriation of this right on the part of children, its recognition by the adult world and, as a result, the achievement of its full exercise.

At this point we shall give an account of how, on several different occasions and with the participation of the children themselves, demand for a conceptual Framework of Reference has been building; one which will make it possible to advance in how we deal with this issue, on the basis of an analysis of the road already covered.

The "International Meeting on Child Participation in Latin America" was held in early 2004 in Cuenca, Ecuador. Children from twelve countries reflected upon and exchanged experiences in participation carried out in their countries. One of the objectives of the event was the revision of the definitions of participation handled in the region, which made it possible to arrive at a concept on the basis of ideas produced by the participating children themselves.

The Action Plan of the Inter-American Children's Institute for the period 2007-2011 was approved during the 82nd Regular Meeting of the Directing Council, held in Cartagena, Colombia, in 2007. With regard to the promotion and protection of rights area, the Plan proposed within its lines of action, to promote, inform and advise Member States which requested it, in order to generate actions on behalf of children's right to participation and citizen education (IIN, 2007).

The central activity in order to obtain this outcome was the production of a situation diagnosis, made known and shared with key actors in different countries. It was hoped that the States would participate in compiling updated information as well as in its analysis. The expected output included "the formation of organized groups of children who will participate in monitoring their rights virtually and interactively", through a web site established for that purpose (IIN, 2007).

The production of a 'state of the art' which included the points of view, experiences and contributions of the protagonists themselves, and would serve as an instrument to promote genuine child participation was established as a strategic target for the period.

In April 2008, the IIN, together with UNICEF celebrated an Inter-American Forum for Children in Querétaro (Mexico), entitled "My Right to Participate". This forum constituted "an area for dialogue and self-expression for children from 13 States who gave their opinions on participation in the region and drew conclusions".

The minutes of this forum give an account of the wealth of the contributions of the children who participated, the level of integration achieved despite their cultural diversity, and the depth of the inter-generational dialogue produced during the event.

In the conclusions, it is proposed, amongst other things, to "promote knowledge management with regard to the right to participation". This includes working on the concept, indicators, follow-up and monitoring systems, the systematization of experiences ("on the basis of lessons learned without overlooking history, reflection and permanent feedback related to progress achieved"), the production of knowledge and its circulation amongst the children and their companions: the training of facilitators with a rights-based approach and with respect for diversity (IIN, 2008).

In short, they expressed a need for the dialogical production of knowledge and instruments which would work towards making the right to participation of children more widely effective.

During the 83rd Regular Meeting of the Directing Council of the IIN (held in Ottawa, on 15 and 15 October 2008), the agenda for the Twentieth Pan American Child Congress to be held in Lima, Peru, in September 2009, was approved.

One of the principal thematic focal points to be dealt with was: "The participation of children in the building of citizenship and its impact on public policy". In addition, it was resolved to form a working group composed of representatives of the States and IIN technicians, and with the cooperation of a UNICEF representative, in order to work on organizational, conceptual and methodological issues related to the handling of this subject during the Twentieth Congress. This group met in Quito, Ecuador in February 2009, with the presence of delegations of children from the ten countries which composed the working group¹. A document was produced, entitled: "The principle of child participation. An approximation to the construction of a framework of reference". In its opening paragraphs this document indicates that,

"The Member States present at the Working Meeting on Child Participation agree to support the idea of formulating a draft conceptual framework of reference based on the presentations made by both the convening organizations and institutions and the representatives of the States and in particular, on the contributions of the children. For the Convention on the Rights of the Child signatory States, the framework of reference should be based on a new paradigm which considers children as subjects of rights and with their own capabilities" (IIN, 2009).

Subsequently, it explicitly enjoins the task of drawing up this framework upon the IIN and describes the steps to be followed during the process: "The responsibility for drafting this framework of reference belongs to the IIN. Member States which took part in the working group and the adolescents who were present at the event should also be consulted. The document must also be submitted to the consideration of other States and specialized bodies, in order to receive the greatest possible number of contributions prior to the celebration of the Twentieth Pan American Child Congress" (IIN, 2009).

In addition, it was agreed at this meeting to hold the First Pan American Child Forum within the framework of the Twentieth Congress, and the IIN was entrusted with the task of providing technical advice to the States for the drafting of the country reports on the situation of child participation, as well as the subsequent systematization of these reports, which was to be submitted during the Twentieth Congress.

In compliance with this resolution, the IIN develops a framework of reference for the subject of child participation, an inter-disciplinary document in which conceptual tools, strategies, methodologies, techniques and experiences can be identified and included, for the promotion and protection of such participation.

It should be noted that during the process of drafting this document, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child issued General Comment N°12, "The right of the child to be heard". These comments, drawn up on the basis of a general debate and the observations gathered from the country reports submitted by the Party States, have the purpose of promoting the improved application of the Convention and helping the Party States to fulfil their obligations through the development of relevant public policies. These documents constitute a doctrinal source for the States and for society in general, and provide conceptual guidelines and operational elements in order to improve the implementation of policies in keeping with the principles and precepts of the Convention.

That the Committee should issue this document is one more sign of the significance the subject has acquired in recent years, as well as of the difficulties which have been observed in understanding and putting it into practice in the different countries.

¹ These countries were Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Lucia, the United States and Uruguay.

The whys and wherefores of a framework of reference

The process described above, which led to the decision to draft a framework of reference, shows how the demand developed gradually as a reflection of a growing awareness of the need to consult a framework such as this, as well as of its importance as a tool for the consolidation and strengthening of the right to participation of children, on the basis of existing experiences.

At the meeting held in Quito in compliance with Resolution CD/RES. 07 of the Directing Council of the IIN, a series of agreements were drafted which served as a guide for the production of the framework of reference. These agreements were initially discussed amongst the inter-generational delegations present: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Paraguay and Uruguay, as well as the United States of America and Saint Lucia, who participated without children or adolescents. Later, all of the 34 countries in the region received the content of the agreements and proposals and endorsed them, and the countries which had not taken part in the working group made further significant contributions.

Before analysing the contents of this document, we should first consider some of the terms used and the meanings implied, in order to add to the better understanding of the implications of the proposal.

In its original sense, the word 'framework' refers to a series of criteria which make it possible to delimit a territory, to establish boundaries in order to organize the work to be carried out in it (for example, sowing). 'References' are marks or signs which are situated in a territory in order to guide people who pass through it or work in it. Guidance may follow the points of the compass, indicate the direction a traveller must move in, or show the location of certain points or significant places within a wider area.

Both terms take their meaning from a metaphor which uses a group of connected subjects and problems, as within a field, plot of land or territory.

In physics (and, by analogy, in psychology) a field is a spatial cutout in which various forces act, interact and retroact, determining the behaviour of objects and processes which occur in it. The notion of a field is related to dynamics and conflict. A framework demarcates a field in order to facilitate its study, understanding and the handling of what occurs in it.

When we apply these terms to the practices and conceptualizations on the right to participation of children on the American continent, we are recovering and applying the same meanings to this reality:

- We are faced with a field in which different 'forces' can be identified; some of them contradictory: the right stipulated by the CRC, the resistance of the adult world to acknowledge children's capabilities at different stages of their development, the purpose of social control, the purpose of strengthening democracy, tensions between discrimination, assimilation and respect for diversity, and the very diverse adult interests which come into play, amongst others.
- A framework should establish boundaries and organization by means of contributions which provide a common technical support to the initiative; it should be shared within the continent; it should include methodological and instrumental resources – that is, it should provide definitions and guidance on the subject.
- The referential characteristic is made evident when it is proposed to include in this framework significant experiences, indicators and follow-up criteria which will contribute to the design of public policies and, therefore, facilitate strategic decisions.

The Quito Document (IIN, 2009) clearly defines what the principal pivot of the framework should be when it states that: "For the Convention on the Rights of the Child signatory States, the framework of reference is based on a new paradigm which considers children as subjects of rights and with their own capabilities".

It defines the framework of reference as "an interdisciplinary instrument. That is, an instrument which coordinates the contributions of different disciplines to the extent that they are pertinent and operative in order to guarantee the exercise of this right."

With regard to the content which the framework was expected to include, the document lists a series of elements which we have regrouped as follows:

- A diagnosis of the situation of child participation in the continent, twenty years after the Convention.
- Conceptualizations which will make it possible to advance regarding agreements favourable to genuine participation.
- Methodological, technical and instrumental justification.
- The identification of practices which will lead to the design of public policies.
- Indicators which will make it possible to evaluate and monitor processes.
- Contributions to the design and implementation of programmes for training adults in keeping with a rights-based approach.

The instrumental and operative character of the framework, with the purpose of fostering the conditions required for the effective participation of children in the resolution of subjects which affect their lives, was constantly reaffirmed.

With regard to methodology, the mandate is clear; the documents which have already been produced must be compiled, children's opinions included, existing experiences and the lessons they have provided taken into account. In addition, a greater degree of involvement on the part of the States must be encouraged in order to build a consensus which will facilitate continuity.

A first draft of this paper was made available to the States during the Twentieth Pan American Congress (Lima, October 2009) and submitted to discussion during the 2nd Working Group Meeting on Child Participation (Panama, 9 and 10 December 2009). The final version of the Framework of Reference includes the comments and contributions made by the representatives of the States, both in person and in writing. This made it possible to build a consensus amongst the States which endows the proposal with exceptional value and generates the best possible conditions for the sustainability of regional actions arising from it.

In short, this is a document produced on the basis of the hemisphere's reality, with the contributions of the protagonists and the consensus of the States, and which aspires to become an instrument which will stimulate progress in the effective exercise of the right to participation.

Document organization

The framework of reference is organized in the following way:

I – Part I includes the systematization and analysis of the documents drafted by the IIN, international agencies and bibliographical references considered relevant. The purpose of this first part is to organize and systematize conceptual elements.

The opinions and contributions of the various actors, particularly children, are included only when they have been compiled in the documents mentioned above. Amongst other bibliographical references, Part I includes the documents and declarations arising from children's forums and meetings, as well as the recent contributions of the Committee on the Rights of the Child through General Comment 12, and of the IIN itself during the Twentieth Pan American Congress and the First Child Forum held in Lima, Peru, in September 2009. The comments and contributions made by the States have been included on the basis of the documents mentioned above².

II – Part II provides an overview of the situation of the right to participation of children in the countries of America, twenty years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The 'country reports' which the IIN requested from the 33 OAS member States, in accordance with the guidelines which were provided, are the principal source of information, in keeping with the terms decided at the meeting held in Quito, Ecuador.

A quantitative and qualitative analysis was made on the basis of these reports, and in accordance with the guidelines arising from the Quito Meeting: "The framework of reference should provide a special place for reflection on the effective participation practices which are taking place in the States" (Quito 2009).

III – The report concludes by making 'Conclusions and Recommendations' aimed at the States and organizations involved in this process. It seeks to reflect in them the children's proposals in the hope that they will contribute to the implementation of sustainable public policies.

At the same time, in view of their significance regarding progress in this matter on the basis of experience, as laid down by the Quito mandate, we have included two appendices in this paper.

Appendix 1 – Thinking about participation by participating – the experience of the 1st Forum of Adolescents held within the framework of the Twentieth Pan American Child Congress in Lima, 2009.

² The 2nd Regional Workshop (Panama, 9-10 December 2009) was attended by delegates from Costa Rica, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Peru, United States and Uruguay. Argentina and Canada sent written contributions. .

PART I THEORETICAL-CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1. Reasons for child participation

When referring to the reasons why States should promote child participation, the literature on the subject usually revolves around, and limits itself to, two main arguments. In the first place, it is a right enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and therefore constitutes a mandate for the Party States (CRC signatories). Secondly, participatory experience is important in forming future citizens who will be capable of consolidating and strengthening democracy.

Although both arguments are undeniably true and valid, they are not sufficient, inasmuch as they do not include the multiple dimensions and potentialities of child participation, both for its protagonists and for the societies in and with which these processes take place. It is more than an obligation; more than a hope for the future; it should also be part of the present for the children of the continent.

In this respect, it seems pertinent to quote an Ecuadorian girl who participated in the Querétaro Forum: “Prepare the child of today and you need not worry about the adult of tomorrow” (Hiparía Vega 2008).

Some of the reasons to promote participation are given below. In view of the clarity and precision with which the Quito Declaration refers to these issues, we have decided to include quotations from the declaration at the beginning of each item (IIN, 2009).

a) THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE AS A FOCAL POINT OF THE NEW PARADIGM INTRODUCED BY THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

“For the signatory States of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, child participation is a right which is in harmony with that international instrument” (Quito 2009).

In the CRC, participation is not merely another right.

“The right of all children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental values of the Convention” (UN General Comment N° 12). Further on it points out, with reference to Art. 12, that, “this article establishes not only a right in itself, but should also be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights”.

This reaffirms the fact that the “right to be heard and taken seriously”, conceptualized in general terms as participation, is a right and at the same time one of the guiding principles which runs through the whole of the text, together with the principles of progressive autonomy, non-discrimination and the best interests of the child as an end in the resolution of conflicts.

Secondly, but not less important, it is the apex or meeting point for a whole group of rights on which it rests: a child’s right to forming his or her own views, to freedom of opinion and expression, to be heard, to seek, receive and impart ideas, to be informed and seek information, to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, to freedom of thought and conscience, to having his or her points of view taken into account in settings such as the family, schools and other institutional areas.

The enshrinement of this group of rights contradicts the traditional concept of childhood as an ‘incomplete or deficient state’ and institutes a new perspective according to which a child is a thinking being, capable of forming his or her own views, of having his or her own ideas in keeping with the extent of his or her maturity (principle of progressive autonomy). In short, it opens up the view of the child as a person.

This not only modifies the situation of children, but also makes it necessary to relocate the adult world and its institutions. Acknowledging and exercising participation and its associated rights gives rise to misalignments, alterations and rifts, which derive in radical changes with regard to the place assigned to children in our cultures.

Although the rights to life, health, education and privacy were consolidated and strengthened in the Convention, they had already been previously enshrined. They are not necessarily in opposition to the fact that children are considered a legal commodity or as the object of protection or care.

The new status of a child as a subject of rights appears to be closely linked to rights which have historically been considered as civil and political: the right to information, to hold opinions, to association, to participation.

A subject of rights must necessarily also be the subject of verbalization, and he or she must be capable of self-expression, of forming his or her own views, of giving opinions and of expressing and maintaining those opinions to others.

The Convention and the Codes which are based on it and include the perception of children as subjects of rights expanded democratic areas until then reserved for adult citizens and made possible new ways of handling the needs, aspirations and rights of children.

The principle/right to participation implies deconstructing the traditional conception of childhood; of children without a voice and of adults as the sole interpreters of the needs of children, in order to make room for the voice of children as a valid expression of their interests and opinions.

b) PARTICIPATION AS A NEED FOR THE FULL PSYCHO-SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN BEINGS

“Child participation has an impact on the emotional and intellectual development of children as well as on their life projects.” (Quito 2009)

As the essentially human phenomenon that it is, child participation is composed of a variety of dimensions. Amongst them, the psycho-social dimension is the one which has been least analysed in the papers and essays on the subject. In recent years, several authors in the field of Community Psychology have stressed the importance of participation as a human need and a necessary condition for the full development of persons.

From the moment human beings come into the world, they are enmeshed in a network of interpersonal links and relationships. The vulnerability and defencelessness of all human beings at the moment of birth makes it necessary for them to depend on these links for the satisfaction of their needs, for an extended period of time. This has led social psychologists to insist upon the fact that human needs are based on connections from the very beginning of life.

From the moment of his or her birth – and even sooner – a child is part of a group which performs a series of actions tending towards, amongst other things, preserving the child’s life. From that very moment, therefore, a child is part of the sense of belonging.

At the same time, this human group assigns the child to a place within its symbolic and cultural structure. This is done on the basis of culture, social status and the specific characteristics of the group. It also contains an implicit reading and prioritization of the child’s needs, expectations regarding the child’s contributions to the group and the allocation of a certain position towards which and from which these exchanges will take place. Thus the social group includes the child as one of its own, within a historical and cultural tradition, which gives rise to a second level of participation associated with belonging.

After these basic procedures, the child will begin to take part in collective actions; a process which, in keeping with the principle of progressive autonomy, will lead to more active and engaged levels of participation.

Hernández (1994) distinguishes three dimensions in participation: being, having and taking.

- To be a part of is connected to the social bond which joins people to all of the collective areas they are a part of during the course of their lives, and which play a basic role in the formation of their identity.
- To have a part refers to the place allocated – ‘my place’, ‘your place’, ‘our place’ – and from which exchanges with others occur.
- To take part refers to doing; implies the active attitude of a subject who becomes involved in his or her group’s actions or decisions.

Sánchez (1995) states that participation, in this strict sense of taking part, “engages the emotions and the cognitive capabilities of people” in producing and putting into practice a series of decisions which are connected to a model of development and coexistence.

If we venture into psychological literature, we shall see that the constitution of human personality is based on processes of identification on the basis of certain models which the child takes from his or her surroundings and social experiences. In this respect, participation is the process which ‘fastens’ individual to social processes, thus becoming a support for the personal growth of the social subject (Ferullo, AG 2006).

Being part of a group implies, subjectively, the development of a feeling of belonging. We belong to a group with which we share feelings, experiences and information, we produce meanings and develop actions. Thus we gain access to cooperation – ‘operating jointly’ – to the extent that we are recognized as thinking beings, we will share our opinions and become part of the process of constructing collective decisions.

Such central aspects of personal development as self-esteem, the possibility of behaving autonomously, respect and consideration for others, are strengthened and nourished through the participatory experiences which a child has the chance of undergoing during his or her development.

In addition, these experiences will allow the child to assimilate bonding matrix models which he or she will later be able to propose and maintain in the face of new situations, thus promoting respectful and healthy collective relationships.

In this respect, Diego Pólit has introduced the concept of ‘actor’ to refer to people who use their capacity to act on the basis of their own senses, this being one of the essential dimensions which defines the nature of a child or indeed, of any person (Diego Polit, 2007).

In order to be an actor, two conditions are necessary; that each person should recognize his or her own status as an actor, and that he or she should also recognize this status in other persons with whom he or she interacts. This ‘acting’ capacity is what defines persons as social subjects and as citizens and has an underlying emotional and cognitive layer without which people would not find it possible to maintain their links.

A person who is capable of regarding him or herself as an actor, is also capable of valuing his or her way of seeing, feeling and understanding the world, and his or her own life. It means appreciating what one is and what one is like. It means being proud of what one is, with one’s own qualities and weaknesses. It means viewing qualities as something to strengthen and weaknesses as an opportunity for improvement (IIN 2009).

c) PARTICIPATION AS STRENGTH AND PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN IN THE FACE OF THE VIOLATION OF RIGHTS

“Child participation influences the systems of protection of rights. It has been shown that when participation increases, levels of vulnerability and risk descend.” (Quito 2009)

Some of the causes and conditions of the most serious violations of the rights of children are rooted in the persistence of the vulnerability of children and the asymmetry of power in the face of adults. Social and culturally constructed conditions lead to enveloping these situations in a cloak of silence and invisibility which becomes the main accomplice of exploiters and abusers. This includes violence within the family and within institutions, abuse, commercial and non-commercial sexual exploitation, the provision of alcohol and drugs and all the worst forms of child labour.

Silence is not only a consequence of the fear and submission of victimized children, but also arises from the lack of credibility with which the adult world endows the testimony of children; the tendency to discredit the information they provide and to put it down to fantasy, ignoring their capacity to perceive and transmit what they experience.

Silence is not only fear or the impossibility of speaking, but also the absence of someone to hear and believe what the children are saying.

Despite the twenty years which have elapsed since the adoption of the Convention, the efforts of civil society and the States and the progress achieved at different levels, there is still a significant gap between the rights enshrined in legal texts and their acknowledgement in social cultures and daily practices. New regulations exist together with strongly rooted cultural beliefs and representations which reaffirm the subordination of children to adults, ignoring their status as citizens.

Cultural traditions and their expressions in daily settings are the areas in which State policies have the greatest difficulty in achieving true transformations. This places children in a vulnerable position, at the mercy of the arbitrariness of adults and the legitimation of this behaviour through culture.

In its General Comment N° 12, the Committee on the Rights of the Child observed that in most societies the application of the right of children to express their points of view regarding the wide variety of matters which concern them, and to have these opinions taken seriously, still collide with the obstacles of adults' attitudes and political and economic barriers. It also expressed concern regarding the quality of many supposedly participatory practices.

To the extent that the postulates of the Convention begin to be reflected in actual practices, a strengthening process begins to develop amongst children as active subjects in the different social areas: families, communities, institutions.

Although the concept of strengthening has a variety of definitions, depending on the situation and context in which the term is employed, it is used by Latin American community psychologists to refer to the process of reevaluation of individuals in a situation of subjection, in which the accent is on their strengths and potential, through the organization and promotion of the increasing exercise of their right to give their opinions and have a say in matters which concern them, with a view to introducing changes in their social environment and in the positions they have been assigned in relation to certain power centres (Montero, M. 2003).

In the case of children, this process requires the support of the adult world; companions and facilitators who make access to experiences involving reflection, awareness and collective action, possible.

The strengthening process includes several elements which interweave synergically:

- The development of the capacity of expression: to be able to speak and be listened to.
- Giving opinions and generating transparency regarding the operation of educational, health and shelter institutions, and all of those which are a part of children's daily life and where practices and conducts exist which violate their rights.
- Generating means of communication and self-protection in the face of situations which threaten their rights: ill-treatment, exploitation in its several forms, the traffic and supply of drugs.
- Denouncing, facing and dismantling discriminatory behaviour.
- Acquiring the capacity for organization, team work and taking collective decisions, according to age.
- Developing a feeling of belonging to their communities, as well as commitment and responsibility in collective issues.
- Strengthening self-esteem through the recognition of resources, capabilities and strengths and the construction of respect, and the consequent recognition of this potential by adults.

The importance of participation as a part of a strategy for protection has been taken up again recently in international forums and studies.

In the prologue to the Latin America report issued within the framework of the United Nations World Report on Violence against Children, specialist Paulo Sergio Pinheiro states that:

"Although providing guarantees for the protection of the rights of children is an obligation of the State, the cooperation of all, including civil society organizations, research centres, and the children themselves, is indispensable. The challenges which violence represents are many and require the cooperation of us all."

Amongst its recommendations for the prevention of violence, the report proposes the design of policies which foster the participation of children, such as to, "document, systematize and disseminate participation experiences regarding prevention"; "promote programmes with the participation of victims"; "ensure that children are consulted during legal proceedings, as well as during the production of country reports"; increase their participation in the media, viewing them as a valid source of opinion, accepting their leadership in communication areas and in the production of information.

Some of the passages in the recommendations stress very clearly the importance of participation with relation to protection and the risks entailed by manipulation on the part of adults:

"To guarantee the participation of children in the process of protection in keeping with the principle of progressive autonomy", and further on: "that the voice of children be promoted, and not the voice of adults who use children to get them to say what they want them to say."

During the Third World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children which took place in November 2008, the Declaration of Rio de Janeiro was approved, as well as a Call for Action to prevent and stop the sexual exploitation of children. Amongst the measures proposed in order to confront this form of exploitation is: "The right of children to express their opinions and that those opinions be granted due weight in all matters which affect their lives, including all legal and administrative proceedings."

In addition, the States are recommended to: "Mobilize communities, including children and adolescents, with a view to engaging them in dialogue on and a critical review of social norms and practices and economic and social conditions that make children vulnerable to trafficking, and establish procedures that involve them in developing strategies and programmes where they participate, where appropriate, in the planning, implementation and monitoring of such programmes."

The problem of investing resources is also present in the recommendations to the States: "Promote and fund meaningful child and youth participation at all levels in the design, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes, in campaigns and through peer-to-peer youth programmes, aimed at raising awareness and preventing the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and adolescents."

The recommendations also emphasize that children should have access to information and to an education based on values through which they can adopt active and critical attitudes in relation to the way social life is regulated and legitimized, or that exploitation is tolerated:

- "Support children to gain deeper knowledge of their own rights to be free from sexual exploitation, and the options available to help them to address abuse, so that they are empowered, with the partnership of adults, to end sexual exploitation."
- "Engage children in meaningful and critical examination of changing contemporary values and norms and their potential to increase vulnerability to sexual exploitation; and promote education to enhance children's understanding of these issues in relation to sexual exploitation."

Two hundred and eighty two adolescents from ninety-six countries took part in the Congress and issued a document entitled "Adolescent Declaration to End Sexual Exploitation", on 28 November 2008, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Some of its most significant passages on participation and its connection with protection are transcribed below.

"Children have suffered too much from adult exploitation. But, organized and united, we have gone from being victims to being actors. Our children's organizations give us the strength to defend ourselves and fight for our rights."

"We are here to contribute to the process of fighting this issue and raising awareness about this problem that continues to grow larger. We respect adults, our parents and the life rules of our different countries. But we also want the respect of all of you. Everyone has the right to respect and this is an attitude that everyone should adopt."

"However, it is not enough to just give us a voice; you MUST also listen. Listen to our calls for urgent action, listen to our experiences and most importantly, listen to our solutions."

They also call for participation opportunities in government agencies and international organizations: "a children's forum and organization led by children and for children needs to be established to ensure child and adolescent participation to prevent sexual exploitation. We also ask that each major governmental agency and international organization dealing with children's rights should have a Children's Ambassador."

They conclude by reaffirming their right to be heard: "Once again, we ask that the Governments of the World should engage us, the children, and listen to our voices."

"We are convinced that human beings are not the result of chance but that we have to realize our goal which is to make it possible for our realities and experiences to leave a trace. If I leave my children the same world as the one my parents left me, my existence will have been in vain; however, if my existence enriches my successors, my existence will have been justified."

d) PARTICIPATION AS A COMPONENT OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY AND THE EXERCISE OF CITIZENSHIP

“Include the rights of children in school curricula, to be taught by means of experiential methodologies.” (Lima 2009).

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child issued General Comment N° 1 in 2001: The Aims of Education. This document, which refers to the application of Article 29 of the Convention, establishes the characteristics education should include.

- “The education to which every child has a right is one designed to provide the child with life skills, to strengthen the child’s capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights and to promote a culture which is infused with appropriate human rights values.
- “The goal is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence.”

Further on, the text is even more explicit with regard to the content of education:

“Basic skills include not only literacy and numeracy but also life skills such as the ability to make well-balanced decisions; to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner; and to develop a healthy lifestyle, good social relationships and responsibility, critical thinking, creative talents, and other abilities which give children the tools needed to pursue their options in life.”

Education can make a significant contribution to democracy and the construction of a culture of rights. However, education is not merely content and information. This subject is frequently over-simplified by the concept that educating in rights is informing students about the conventions and laws which guarantee them.

In this respect, educators have warned about the existence of a ‘hidden curriculum’ which operates within educational institutions. The expression refers to all of those experiences, models and values (or anti-values) which children assimilate as part of their learning experience despite their not being expressly included in the curricula. It includes forms of inter-generational relations, gender and peer relations, the values of solidarity and competition, ways of resolving conflicts, discriminatory behaviour and all of those elements children see and experience in the daily life of an educational institution and on the basis of which they assimilate learning experiences.

General Comment N° 1 includes this very concept:

- “ ‘Education’ in this context goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society.”
- “The participation of children in school life, the creation of school communities and student councils, peer education and peer counselling, and the involvement of children in school disciplinary proceedings should be promoted as part of the process of learning and experiencing the realization of rights.”

However, empowering children for true participation is not limited to the content or to the experiences available in the classroom:

“Human rights education should provide information on the content of human rights treaties. But children should also learn about human rights by seeing human rights standards implemented in practice, whether at home, in school, or within the community. Human rights education should be a comprehensive, life-long process and start with the reflection of human rights values in the daily life and experiences of children.”

The term “education in the sphere of human rights” is used so often that its connotations have become excessively simplified. As well as official education on human rights, it is necessary to promote the values and policies which will favour human rights, not only in schools and universities, but also within the whole community.

In the same spirit, Corona and Morfin highlight the importance of everyday settings:

“The importance of fostering participation in everyday life must be stressed, because it is here that ‘everything acquires meaning: it colours everything, permeates everything, takes everything into its own sphere’: it is here that the order of society is reflected and gradually built. It is frequently perceived as something natural which should be preserved; however, this is one of the privileged areas in which it is possible to bring about change and construct relationships which can transform society in its entirety.”

A child’s capacity to participate fully and responsibly in society does not only depend on his or her access to formal education. Informal educational strategies have proved to have a greater strength of penetration in everyday life, questioning and changing relationships in their own settings.

R. Hart underlines the importance of experience in this kind of learning:

“Children should be involved in meaningful projects, together with adults. It is not realistic to expect children suddenly to become responsible and participatory adults at the age of 16, 18 or 21, if they have not previously been exposed to the skills and responsibilities this implies. Understanding democratic practices, the confidence and competency needed in order to participate can only be acquired through practices; they cannot be taught in the abstract.”

Learning about participation takes place within an inter-generational society. This explains the importance of the trans-generational transmission of values and models which sustain and give meaning to participatory processes. Children who watch their elders participate and involve themselves collectively in collective problems, enjoy and suffer the achievements and difficulties of their communities, will more easily assimilate the skills and attitudes which participation calls for.

In short, it is possible to conclude that education in rights is not educating for participation, but educating through participation itself; it is not necessarily a form of curricular education, but the promotion of learning which must connect different strategies and include a cross-section of diverse everyday experiences (in families, schools, communities, etc.).

e) PARTICIPATION AS A STRATEGY FOR INTERVENTION IN VIOLENT SITUATIONS

Violence and the feelings of insecurity which are associated with it are now amongst the principal concerns of the continent’s societies. Despite the great differences in volume, degree of violence and characteristics of delinquent activities in the different countries, the way the media handles the subject, its presence on the political agenda and the concerns expressed by citizens, are constant.

A further reiterated aspect is the tendency to make young people and adolescents from the more vulnerable sectors responsible for these incidents.

The population’s feelings of fear and insecurity lead to demands for greater control and repression on the part of the State, thus paving the way for solutions which are simplistic and regressive from the perspective of rights, based on separation, imprisonment and preventive punishment for those who, because of their social status, are seen to represent an apparent danger.

Repression is not only aimed at the perpetrators of the supposed crimes but also includes everyone who belongs to the same age and social group. One part of society perceives the other to be different, foreign and threatening; pervading inter and intra-generational coexistence with an all-encompassing aura of violence. We thus embark upon the dangerous road towards the 'radicalization of difference', widening social gaps and feeding the spiral of violence and exclusion. (Giorgi, 2009)

In such a scenario, the life of adolescents is pervaded with violence of diverse kinds: discrimination, exclusion and criminalization constitute symbolic forms of violence to which they respond in turn with violent behaviour, seeking self-affirmation and particular ways of marking their belongings and their rivalries, both amongst their peers and amongst gangs, or towards society as a whole.

If we observe the ways in which such violent incidents are reported in the public scene we shall see that children and adolescents are assigned a singular place in connection with them. They are pointed to as the perpetrators of incidents; it is they who act out violent episodes, but their version of events are never reported. It is as though they acted, but were 'spoken about by others'.

Neither are the opinions of their peers taken into account. It is as though all adolescents of their age and status (social, economic, ethnic) were guilty of such events and at the same time, had no right to express their points of view with regard to them. Even less are their potential contributions borne in mind, nor the possibility of their becoming involved in the construction of solutions other than separation, imprisonment and exclusion.

Several experiences carried out within communities are proof of the significance which participation can have, as well as the organization of groups of adolescents on the basis of respect and tolerance of differences, and the search for non-violent forms of inter and intra-generational expression and communication. Carrying out participatory diagnoses regarding the situations they are involved in, performing a critical analysis of their own reality, and the collective construction of proposals which bear in mind their points of view and make it possible to overcome social fragmentation through the identification of common problems gradually displace violent behaviour and give way to other forms of relating with the environment.

The very adults who discriminated against adolescents and believed them to be incapable of sustaining values and contributing to the coexistence of the community are surprised to find themselves faced with persons with potential, who are concerned about the situation in which they find themselves and are willing to commit to the construction of solutions.

This has led to giving pride of place to the participation of adolescents in programmes for the prevention of violence and the promotion of social cohesion.

f) PARTICIPATION AS A CORRELATE OF HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE BASED ON MUTUAL RESPECT AND THE STRENGTHENING OF SOCIAL COHESION

"Child participation contributes to the strengthening of democracy, generates active citizens who contribute towards social, cultural, economic and political development." (Quito 2009)

The concept of social cohesion has been taken up by Social Science on the basis of an analogy with physics. In physics, cohesion is the force which holds the molecules of a body together. It is dependent on three variables which define the relationship between the molecules: distance, integration and the force which connects them

By analogy, social cohesion is the result of: social, cultural, economic or generational distance between persons or groups; the means of integration and the sense of adherence or belonging.

This feeling of belonging enables us to recognize other persons or groups as part of our community despite existing differences; both they and we can feel that we belong to the same human collective. It is the basis of solidarity and is opposed to discrimination, inasmuch as it brings us closer to one another.

Social cohesion facilitates participation, but at the same time, participation consolidates and strengthens social cohesion. Through participation, children begin to understand that they have rights, but that these rights go hand-in-hand with responsibilities. Being listened to entails the obligation of listening to others; thus children are educated in diversity and tolerance through specific practice.

Reflection and action for the achievement of common aims strengthen a collective identity based on values, interests and shared motivation, and sustains the existence of the group. Participation in settings which accept diversity breaks down discriminatory behaviour based on ignorance of others as persons. In situations of social disintegration or of social, cultural or ethnic gaps, participation in joint initiatives contributes to recreating a social bond and operates as an 'adhesive'.

Participation has a series of effects both on children and on the adults who interact with them:

- It develops commitment and sensibility with regard to collective problems. Children who develop their capacity for participation do not feel that they are passive victims of events surrounding them but co-actors in the search for alternatives. Children become involved in the problems, take them on and sense the challenge to construct common solutions. This implies a different attitude towards public affairs.
- It helps to make adults acknowledge the capacity of children to form their own judgment, to contribute ideas and behave responsibly regarding subjects on which they are enabled to participate.
- It opens new channels of inter-generational communication where the traditional roles have changed for both children and adults; they develop mutual respect and learn to process conflict according to certain codes and on the basis of reason.
- It favours introjection and the assimilation of common values, the learning of non-violent and non-excluding means of resolving conflicts and promotes the construction of consensus.

In short, participation contributes to the development of a civic conscience, reinforces the links of solidarity, favours understanding of the concept of general interest and enables involvement in public affairs which are no longer other people's problems and become our own.

g) PARTICIPATION FROM AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

"Why is it that when grown-ups are talking about something and you give your opinion they scold you?" (PROPIA, 2008)

An adult says, with a stern glare: "Do as I say. I was a child long before you were." And the child answers: "Yes, but you were never a child in the world I live in."

This dialogue could take place in a home, an institution, or a community; the characters could be a child and a parent, or teacher, or neighbour, or any adult who is convinced that his or her condition as an adult is a sufficient argument to resolve any difference of opinion with a child. The situation is paradigmatic of the attitude of most adults towards children. It could be analyzed from different points of view, amongst them, the ethical perspective.

Ethics is the analysis of human behaviour from the perspective of values. Although these values may arise from different sources, in public policy there is a confrontation between two radically different ethical positions which have been called, respectively, 'the ethics of social welfare' and 'the ethics of autonomy'. (Rebellato, J.L., 1995)

The first attempts to discipline populations in harmony with the values of the predominant cultures. This is a stance which tends dispassionately to impose the dominant values and viewpoints on the values associated with other cultures. In this position, participation has no place, since children must assume and reproduce the 'absolute truths' which their elders transmit. This is consistent with the concept of childhood as an incomplete period in which children have no moral conscience which enables them to have their own positions, points of view or values.

On the other hand, the 'ethics of autonomy' is an evolving ethics in which values are constructed in a process of dialogical communication with the active participation of others. It recognizes in all human beings the potential for ethical reflection, inasmuch as all, whatever their age, level of education or social standing, are bearers of culture, experience and knowledge which are worthy of our respect and consideration.

The 'ethics of autonomy' is characterized by respect for the positions of others, even when they differ, which leads to working with conflict as an element which goes together with any collective process.

Even when educators acknowledge the existence of an asymmetry of power with regard to their pupils, they 'put their certainties on hold' and open up to listening and to dialogue. J. L. Rebellato tells us that: "This position demands putting into practice both an intercultural and an interdisciplinary search. An intercultural search because we must construct new knowledge and a new culture on the basis of a dialectic relationship with the knowledge of subordinate sectors, overcoming the arrogance of intellectuals. An interdisciplinary search because the complexity of the conflicts arising is so broad that it can only be addressed through dialogical work with other disciplines and sciences." (Rebellato J. L. 1995)

We should not confuse the 'ethics of autonomy' with 'weak ethics' which take relativism to the extreme of the most radical kind of individualism, 'each with his or her own values'. The 'ethics of autonomy' respects but confronts, is critical and self-critical, does not impose, but cultivates the construction of shared values on the basis of respect for differences.

In its Article 29, the CRC highlights the importance of understanding rights within a broader ethical, moral, spiritual and social framework, and that most child rights, far from having been imposed from the outside, emerge from the development of values which are present in different cultures and religions. They are the result of consensus which should not be based on simplification, but on a synthesis which compiles the wealth of the diversity of cultures from which they are nourished.

Within this framework, participatory spaces must recognize and respect children as purveyors of culture, values and experiences; whatever their age, they always have a history behind them, their own history which is enmeshed with that of their families, communities or ethnic groups. The essence of the ethics of participation is accepting and respecting others as persons; respect does not imply avoiding critical reflection regarding their values and experiences, but banishing all ideas of superiority or arbitrariness based on relations of power. In a final analysis, it means respect in inter and intra-generational relations; what in simple terms is expressed as the construction of a friendly environment.

h) THE PRINCIPLE/RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION IN THE LEGAL SYSTEMS OF THE STATES

“You tell me, when have we been heard before the authorities make any decision which may affect us?” (PROPIA, 2008)

As we have said, the CRC obliges the Party States to defend and promote the right/principle of participation and other connected rights. The Member States of the OAS, with the sole exception of the United States of America, have signed and ratified the Convention.

After the Convention came into force, a year after it was approved, a process of legislative adaptation was generated in the continent, which led to the drafting and approval by parliaments of new codes which included the principles, guidelines and concepts contained in the Convention, and which were incorporated into the regulatory framework of each State.

As a result of this process, there are:

- Constitutions which predate the Convention or which make no reference to it, in which human rights are recognized but without specifying how they affect children.
- Constitutions which have been relatively recently adopted, which expressly include the principles and postulates of the Convention in their doctrinal corpus.
- Laws (or Codes) which regulate the rights of children in keeping with the Convention.
- Laws such as these which coexist with others which predate the Convention and, in many cases, contradict it. This situation has led Emilio García Méndez to speak of “legal schizophrenia”.
- Decrees, rulings and stipulations which regulate institutional operations and which are often not adapted to the new regulatory framework from the viewpoint of rights.

One of the lessons which can be extracted from the evaluation of the situation of childhood twenty years after the Convention is that the inclusion of rights in legal texts is a necessary step, but not sufficient to guarantee their effectiveness.

Institutional and cultural inertia has led to the social representation of children as commodities to be watched over and controlled and is still current twenty years later. These representations regulate daily conduct in settings such as families, communities and the informal links which arise in educational, health or other institutions through which children pass during their development.

As a result of the adaptation of legal proceedings to the Convention which has been carried out in most of the Party States, the right of children to be heard has been included in legislation. However, few children have occasion to visit legal venues and this right has not been imposed to the same extent in other more meaningful and habitual areas, such as schools or within their own families.

This leads us to consider the need to:

- a) Confront a process of ‘legislative harmonization’ which will bring all regulatory bodies rationally and coherently into line with the precepts of the Convention.
- b) Promote systematic actions tending to prevent the new paradigm from being limited to legal areas and texts, and to cause it to pervade and transform culture, and therefore, habitual forms of coexistence.

The following chart shows the relationship between the different levels of action of the States and their responsibilities with regard to the principle/right to participation (contribution of Costa Rica at the Panama meeting held in December 2009).



Let us bear in mind that the challenge resides in the construction of a culture based on rights. This implies deep changes in social and cultural practices and in the meanings constructed upon them. To the legal dimension must be added that of policy, understood as a policy of everyday life and ethics, placing participation and the respect for children’s opinions in the category of a value which regulates inter-generational relations. These changes validate and facilitate participation, but at the same time, children must also participate actively in them. It is not about waiting, but about practicing rights, showing what they are capable of and contributing to the construction of a coexistence which is respectful of the dignity of all.

2. What do we mean when we talk about participation?

As readers, we are accustomed to finding in the first pages of most books or articles a definition of the subject or issue to which the text refers. The object of analysis is thus determined from the start.

However, in the case of social issues with a certain level of complexity, such as the participation of children, it does not appear to be appropriate to make haste to confine the problem within an attempted definition which could lead to an apparent simplification of the subject.

We have opted to cover some of its aspects, to immerse ourselves in the subject, become aware of its complexity, of its many connections and of the grey areas which surround it before enclosing it within that virtual circle which drafting a definition implies.

Nevertheless, the time has come in the development of the subject when it is necessary to approach a conceptualization which will enable us to begin to make distinctions between what is and what is not participation. As it constitutes a principle which is part of the new childhood paradigm, and a right, ambiguities and laxity in its definition contribute to a shroud of invisibility and confusion with regard to the effective exercise of participation.

The commitment of the Party States with regard to the contents of the Convention, the actions of international organizations which demand and monitor its fulfilment and the pressure of civil society organizations, has often resulted in an attempt to present as participation experiences, a variety of practices and activities which, a priori, do not appear to fulfil the minimum requirements to be considered as such.

A quick survey of the articles and papers produced during the last few years on child participation makes it possible to compile a variety of definitions. On the basis of such a reading, we can make the following observations:

- 1) The abundance of definitions, far from clarifying the subject, reflects the ambiguity with which the term is used and the difficulties in agreeing upon a clear line of demarcation between participation and 'other things'.
- 2) In many of them, the term participation does not seem to be enough to define a universe of practices, which gives rise to the use of adjectives.

There is reference to authentic, meaningful, protagonistic and decision-making participation. In addition, there also appears to be an acceptance of the existence of other participations: incipient, decorative, utilitarian, limited to the expression of ideas.

This places us in a difficult and dangerous position. Neither the Convention nor any of the other international treaties guarantee the right of children to an adjectival participation. The right enshrined is quite simply, participation. If we accept that there are different kinds of participation, we must also accept that any of them might fit within the mandates of the Convention, which would pose the risk of regression in the achievement of children's rights.

This gives rise to the need to recover the content of the term participation without debasing its meaning.

- 3) Polysemy, or the different meanings it is attempted to endow the word participation with, does not merely imply a semantic problem; it reflects the resistance of the adult world to recognizing the capabilities and potential of children when they are empowered in processes which lead to their involvement in the construction of solutions to problems which affect their lives.

It is attempted to fulfil the Convention's mandate through activities in which the presence of children is fully regulated by adult-centred criteria, thus avoiding any threat of change in the relationship of power between generations.

4) This leads to the need to identify the core feature which enables a differentiation between participation and other forms of activity.

The concepts we have worked with so far allow us to sustain that the core characteristic of a participatory experience or process is the acknowledgement of children as persons who are capable of understanding their reality, are able to form their own opinions about it, express them responsibly and involve themselves in the solution of common problems.

Every child has the right to participation from the moment of birth, but if the adult world does not acknowledge and value this capacity, which children acquire gradually from the start of life, this right never becomes fully empowered.

a) SOME DEFINITIONS OF CHILDREN PARTICIPATION

The purpose of this point is to attempt a first approach at conceptualizing and delimiting child participation on the basis of the literature consulted. This conceptualization will be subsequently reformulated and enriched by means of the contributions compiled from the planned surveys and from the country reports remitted by the States.

We have selected a group of definitions from the documents consulted, not because we believe them to constitute a definitive answer to the question of what participation consists of, but as an input to the collective discussion and production this paper proposes.

The Integrated System for the Comprehensive Development of the Family – DIF (Mexico, 2005) states that the term participation, “refers to the possibility of learning the means and processes of democracy through participation experiences in schools, groups and families”.

As the reader will observe, this definition includes an objective expressed in terms of learning the “means and processes of democracy”; a vehicle for such learning, “participation experiences”, and a demarcation of scenarios, “schools, groups and families”. It does not tell us what participation is, nor does it make clear what it means for children. It appears to be more concerned with training future citizens than with exercising children’s rights.

Arnillas, G. and Paucar, N. (2006) define participation as: “The right – assumed as a capacity – to give opinions to and with others. To have their opinions taken seriously and to assume responsibly, according to the extent of their maturity and development, shared decisions regarding matters which affect their lives and the lives of their communities. That is, the power to give opinions, to decide and to act in an organized manner.”

This definition introduces some significant elements. In the first place, the collective nature of participatory processes: “to give opinions to and with others” – which is associated with organizational capacity. In the second place, it introduces the principle of progressive autonomy when it refers to “the extent of their maturity and development”.

But perhaps the most significant element is the introduction of the notion of power. The problem of the distribution of power appears to be closely linked to participatory processes and to the strengthening of democracy in the region. With regard to young people or adults, the process of strengthening involves an accumulation of power which is not necessarily granted, but secured by different means. (Montero, M, 2003)

When we refer to children, this strengthening process acquires different characteristics.

The authors themselves (Anillas, G. Paucar, N.) return to this point: “The exercise of power with regard to the assumed definition of child participation is understood as a capacity, as a personal and subjective recognition of the ability to do something: think, act, participate in making decisions, determine what and how, take on challenges, work together

in a horizontal relationship, acknowledge skills and capabilities. This power is not won by taking it away from someone else; it is constructed by means of the increase of the capacity to exercise it, within the framework of horizontal relationships.”

When we refer to power, we mean the micro-powers which are present in all personal links, be it within the family or in institutions and communities.

“To consider the protagonistic participation of children not only implies that they may freely express opinions, thoughts, feelings and needs, but also that these viewpoints should be taken into account and should influence decision-making; it means that children should be democratically involved by their families, schools, local governments, the media, and government and non-government organizations.”

Discourse on the ‘protagonism’ of children began in Latin America, and derived sustenance from the sources of popular ‘protagonism’ which include various groups which are struggling to improve their living conditions. Alejandro Cussianovich (2001) believes that dignity, initiative, power, excellence, recognition and acceptance are concepts associated with exercising the protagonism of children.

“This is why protagonism is definitely not only a conceptual proposal but also has an inherent political, social, cultural, ethical and spiritual nature which, at the same time, demands a pedagogical attitude and suggests a reconsideration of the social status of children and adults with regard to their roles in local society and in agreement with the people.” (Cussianovich, A, 2001)

This concept of protagonism marks a difference with positions in which participation is understood as a decorative or individual presence of children.

“Protagonism also implies assuming responsibilities, contributing and building jointly; in this sense, it is a point of union, of convergence, which is not compatible with any form of separation or dispersion. It implies interaction and inter-relationships with the environment and with others. This is not ‘I’ the protagonist, it is ‘we’; protagonism, to be considered as such, must be fertile in the development of the protagonism of others.” (Save the Children, 2006)

For some authors, the concept of protagonism appears, rather, to relate to certain organizational experiences involving children, on the basis of the defence of interests which are similar to those of adults. Such is the case of organizations of child workers or farm labourers.

These authors prefer to speak of the social role which children assume and reserve the term ‘protagonist’ for children who take on strong leadership roles similar to those of adult social militants.

It cannot be denied that the idea of protagonism has begun to be included in the very definitions which are being drafted with the participation of children.

In this respect, in early 2004, a meeting was held in Cuenca, Ecuador, on “Child Participation in Latin America”. The Cuenca Declaration (2004) constitutes a landmark in the conceptualization of the subject, since it included the opinions of children who participated in the meeting:

“Effective and protagonistic participation is achieved by being part of active groups, in which ideas are expressed and decisions made, and in which the opinions of both children and adults are included. This implies not being mere spectators, but actors in one’s own future, acknowledging and respecting the leadership of children and proposing strategies in order to achieve the wider participation of all. This also implies undertaking a commitment with reality, fulfilling a multiplying role and fostering participation in the rest of society.”

Further on, the Declaration contains one of the most complete definitions we have seen so far:

“Participation is a right which is achieved through a process of individual and collective construction and struggle, with responsibility and organization, in order to ensure that the opinions and expressions of children and adults (irrespective of race, religion, physical capacity, sex, political opinion or any other distinction) have a strong bearing on decision-making in all settings. This construction process must be based on horizontal relations, with respect, solidarity and excellence, avoiding any decorative, declarative or manipulative usage.” (Cuenca 2004)

This definition, which in itself has the value of being the result of joint work with the inclusion of children, incorporates several concepts which reflect the idea that participation is conceived within a framework of respect for rights, perceived both comprehensively and singly.

It begins by perceiving participation as a right obtained on the basis of a process of “construction and struggle”; it connects individual and collective dimensions, as well as responsibility and organization. It underlines the influence of opinions in the making of decisions. The principle of non-discrimination is introduced in the definition itself. Lastly, it differentiates participation (without adjectives) from what we could call ‘pseudo-participation’.

In its national proposal for child participation, Plan Peru (2009) defines child participation as “A right which is inherent to the individual and his or her condition as a citizen. It is a process which makes it possible to empower children, to allow them to play a role in the determination of a course of action in their own and in collective areas of society, to give free and informed opinions, to make individual and collective decisions, to assume commitments and to generate alternative proposals in matters which interest them; thus becoming protagonists in their own development, in that of their families, their communities and their country.”

In the view of Plan Peru, child participation must be autonomous, an expression of children’s capacity for self-determination, with social status afforded by the children themselves.

In its General Comment N° 12 (2009), the Committee on the Rights of the Child includes the experience accumulated in recent years and introduces the term participation for the first time in its documents:

- “A widespread practice has emerged in recent years, which has been broadly conceptualized as participation, although this term itself does not appear in the text of article 12.” And it adds that, “This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.”
- “The views expressed by children may add relevant perspectives and experience and should be considered in decision-making, policymaking and preparation of laws and/or measures as well as their evaluation.”
- “These processes are usually called participation. The exercise of the child’s or children’s right to be heard is a crucial element of such processes. The concept of participation emphasizes that including children should not only be a momentary act, but the starting point for an intense exchange between children and adults on the development of policies, programmes and measures in all relevant contexts of children’s lives.”

b) PARTICIPATION AND PSEUDO-PARTICIPATION

When we conceptualize participation as the result of a process we must, of necessity, accept the existence of prior phases or stages. Furthermore, these stages should not be confused with pseudo-participatory efforts which do not enable access to higher levels but hinder and deflect the meaning of the exercise of this right.

R. Hart (2006) analyses the different ways in which children may become involved in participatory processes and organizes them in an ascending order.

This has given rise to what has come to be known as the “ladder of children’s participation”. The first three rungs of the ladder are understood to be non-participatory levels.

- 1) ‘Manipulation’ refers to projects in which children do not understand the subjects being addressed and, therefore, do not understand the meaning of their own actions.
- 2) ‘Decoration’ refers to events in which children merely participate in order to reinforce a cause espoused by adults.
- 3) ‘Tokenism’ refers to events in which children are apparently encouraged to participate but in fact have little or no say in the issues to be addressed or the style of communicating them. They are subject to adult discourse.

Patricia del Pilar Horna (2006) has analysed the myths surrounding child participation and made contributions which agree with Hart’s concepts, in the sense of identifying the ‘false ideas’ which support pseudo-participation. Some of the myths she mentions are:

- The physical presence of children at events guarantees participation.
- A child’s attendance as a speaker is a clear indication of participation.
- Events which include games or group dynamics are participatory.
- Whatever children say is right and should not be questioned.
- Children who do not speak up are not participating.

Authentic participation levels imply breaking down the perception of children as beings who are subject to the wishes of adults, and enabling them as subjects with their own capabilities and rights. In our view, the dividing line between the different forms of handling the presence of children, and participation, even in its most elementary stages, is related to the positions to which they are allocated by adults. These positions are places assigned in the symbolic universe of the adult world, which are then reflected in attitudes and actions.

Returning to the ascending ladder proposed by Hart, we arrive at the following levels which, according to the author, now refer to different types of effective participation.

- 4) ‘Assigned but Informed’, means that the project will fulfil a series of requirements:
 - a) The children must understand the purpose of the activity.
 - b) They must know who makes the decisions concerning their involvement and why.
 - c) They should have a meaningful role, not a ‘decorative’ one.
 - d) They should volunteer for the activity after the activity has been made clear to them.
- 5) ‘Consulted and Informed’; the project is entirely handled by adults, but children function as consultants. They understand the purpose of the activity and their opinions are taken seriously.
- 6) ‘Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children’; this sixth level is the first ‘rung’ of effective participation. Children are no longer merely consulted and now share decision-making with adults.

7) 'Child initiated and directed activities'; it is hard to find examples of projects such as this which take place adequately. In the first place because adults do not respond well to initiatives coming from children. In the second place, because even in cases in which adults do accept an initiative arising from children, it is difficult for them not to take on a leading role.

8) 'Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults'; this final level is generally reached by children in the final stages of adolescence and consists of including adults in projects which the children themselves have conceived and developed.

These levels respond to the existence of several factors:

- a) The maturity of the child population involved, in accordance with the principle of progressive autonomy.
- b) Previous experience and lessons learned with regard to participation.
- c) The stages of the group's process.
- d) The participatory experience and tradition of institutions, community and family.
- e) The training and willingness of adults to generate the appropriate conditions.

It is not always advisable to attain the top levels at all times or in all situations. 'Bad experiences' can cause regression and frustration amongst children and reinforce the distrust of adults with regard to children's capabilities in the exercise of the right to participate.

Although Hart's proposal contributes to differentiate between what is and what is not participation, the analogy with a ladder may, in our view, be misleading. In a ladder each rung leads to the next, but in this case the three first rungs do not do this. They do not enable a subsequent ascent but, on the contrary, operate as distracters or hindrances to the process.

When designing public policies it is crucially important to distinguish proposals or experiences which can function as steps towards participation from distortions such as manipulation, decoration or tokenism, which lead to no real change.

The steps which may be considered conducive to superior levels of participation can be identified with the exercise of rights connected with participation, such as: the right to information, to be heard, to express opinions, to meet and enter into associations, until levels are reached where decisions are made and initiatives conducted.

c) PARTICIPATION AND ITS DIMENSIONS

The connection of the principle of participation with a group of rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child makes it possible to speak of the dimensions of participation.

In its document entitled *The Principle of Child Participation* (2009), the IIN identifies several dimensions:

- **Expression**

This refers to children's right to express their opinions freely (Art.12). It implies respect for different forms of expression and acceptance of their language in the different phases of its development. It is associated with freedom of thought, of conscience and of religion (Art. 14). It is respect for the differences which enable inter-generational discussion.

- **Information**

This refers to the freedom to seek, receive and impart information of all kinds. (Art. 13). It is a right which stipulates that adults should provide information to children, bearing in mind their capabilities. It does not only mean 'telling' them, but to do whatever is necessary for children to assimilate the information, understand it and use it in order to form their own views. Care must be taken regarding the form, in order to guarantee the best possible understanding; however, this does not justify a decline in the quality of the information provided, nor a distortion of information.

- **Opinion**

This refers to the content of expression, when children express themselves regarding issues which concern them. It opens the field for inter-generational discussion; the right to give an opinion includes the right to be heard and respected in that opinion.

At this point it seems appropriate to make a detour in order to analyse the subject of listening. Listening implies an attitude of openness on the part of the interlocutor, a commitment and a willingness to accept and acknowledge the interests of others and their style of expression.

Bibliographical searches related to the term 'participation' lead to reports on surveys proposed as a form of listening, as an inclusion of the 'voice' of children. A survey is a form of gathering opinions based on a structured questionnaire, where the designer of the survey determines the subjects addressed, the words used and the possible answers. Without bringing into question the validity of this tool on certain occasions, it does not in itself imply that 'listening' is taking place. In 'listening' it is the other who determines the content, words, tones and idioms which enrich communication and provide it with singularity.

- **Freedom of association and assembly**

This is a central element in human development. It guarantees the right to socialization, communication, and belonging to a group, and opens the way to participation. It finds expression in spontaneous encounters, in peer group meetings and can be the start of organizational processes.

On the occasion of the 2nd Regional Participation Workshop (Panama, 9-10 December 2009), the participating States agreed to include evaluation and systematization as dimensions of participation. Evaluation implies collecting and taking into account the opinions of participants themselves with regard to the processes and techniques used, the role of adults, and their perception of the participatory climate which was or was not achieved. Systematization, for its part, enables sharing experiences, accumulating lessons learned and transcending the closed group in order to influence wider social and cultural scenarios.

Adult-centred positions tend to impose organizational models which mirror those of adult organizations, underrating styles which are characteristic of each stage of human development. Games, recreational gatherings and the cultural expressions typical of teenagers are some of the ways of exercising the right to assembly which should be respected and valued by adults as expressions which are characteristic of generational differences, but as significant and serious as those of other age groups.

This analytical approach to the dimensions of participation can constitute a significant contribution for the definition of indicators and instruments which will enable the assessment of the degree of participation in a certain area, be it within a project, an institution, or a State.

The conceptual perspective should not lead us to distort the comprehensive nature of participatory experiences and processes. Participation can be viewed as a process with different stages: access to information, forming one's own opinion and the possibility of expressing it to others, who will listen and bear it mind when the time comes to make a decision. Participation includes all of these elements (dimensions), is nourished by them, but also transcends them.

3. Who participates and where?

All human beings have the right to participation, including children, with no discrimination of any kind.

In July 2009, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment N° 12, provided a broad interpretation of some of the expressions contained in the Convention which are sometimes interpreted as restrictions of the right to participation. Such is the case of a child who is “capable of forming his or her own view”; or “matters affecting the child”, when social and community issues are included.

However, one of the many examples of how the adult world resists the recognition of children as individuals who are capable of taking part in activities and processes leading to making decisions is limiting the right to participation to certain specific cases:

- To children who are beginning to resemble adults; such as adolescents.
- To those who stand out for their intelligence or ability to express themselves.
- To those who uncritically and unimaginatively repeat the words of adults.
- To those who take part in elitist educational projects aimed at training leaders who will reproduce the established interests and forms of coexistence.
- Participatory experiences which are limited to settings or areas which are removed from ‘real life’, such as recreational or educational areas, but without taking part in decisions considered of greater importance.

The Querétaro Declaration is explicit when it states that: “This public programme should include policies, plans and programmes for the promotion of this right throughout the child’s life (0 to 18 years).

In line with the principle of progressive autonomy, we should acknowledge that children will have different ways of participating according to the extent of their maturity.

However, from birth human beings endeavour to get to know their surroundings, express their feelings and needs, and attempt different forms of communication. This tendency will develop and shape itself depending on the response arising from the individual’s surroundings.

Children who are mute and passive witnesses to family situations which to a large extent determine their lives, but which are presented as ‘grown-up business’, are the result of an adult-centred culture and should not be attributed to human nature.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the final aim of child participation is to influence decision-making in matters which concern children’s lives. This implies that participation must take place in all settings or social areas in which decisions which directly or indirectly affect them are processed.

A chart known as a ‘participation matrix’ is helpful in the analysis of the distribution of experiences, plans or programmes which promote participation according to age group and social settings.

SETTINGS	0-5 years Early childhood	6-12 years School-age	13-17 years Adolescence
the family			
educational institutions			
the community			
the public sphere			

This matrix admits modifications. We could add a column for youth, or break up 'educational institutions' further and add health, sports and special care institutions. In addition, we could include a fourth setting: forums and regional and international enquiries convened by different organizations: the United Nations, the IIN, or MERCOSUR, to name only a few examples. It is an instrument which enables us to visualize in what settings and at what ages experiences or programmes in a State or group of States are concentrated, which the second part of this paper attempts to do.

a) PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

"Recognizing children as persons and as citizens also implies that they have specific rights as subjects who are developing, which is essential in early childhood, since vital aspects of development are at stake during these years. If we ask ourselves whether small children have a right to be heard, we all agree that they do. But, what does listening to small children imply? What does it mean from the viewpoint of children's rights? What does exercising this right on the part of very young children imply? What socio-educational actions guarantee this right?" (Etchevehere, G., 2009)

In the face of repeated difficulties, reflected in the Party States' reports, regarding the acceptance of the fact that rights include children of all ages, even the youngest, the Committee on the Rights of the Child issued General Comment N° 7 "Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood" (2005), in order to: "encourage recognition that young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention and that early childhood is a critical period for the realization of these rights".

It includes within early childhood: "all young children: at birth and throughout infancy; during the preschool years; as well as during the transition to school." Owing to differences amongst educational systems, the age at which this stage ends ranges between 4 and 7.

One of the objectives of this General Comment is: "To encourage recognition of young children as social actors from the beginning of life, with particular interests, capacities and vulnerabilities," and further on it states again that: "The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right."

Some of the passages of this General Comment which we consider to be particularly significant with regard to the right to participation are quoted below.

- "Young children should be recognized as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view."
 - Item 14 of the Comment refers to the respect for the opinions of young children, "This right reinforces the status of the young child as an active participant in the promotion, protection and monitoring of their rights. Respect for the young child's agency – as a participant in family, community and society – is frequently overlooked, or rejected as inappropriate on the grounds of age and immaturity."
 - "They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language."
 - To achieve the right of participation requires adults to adopt a child-centred attitude, listening to young children and respecting their dignity and their individual points of view. It also requires adults to show patience and creativity by adapting their expectations to a young child's interests, levels of understanding and preferred ways of communicating."
 - "Evolving capacities should be seen as a positive and enabling process, not an excuse for authoritarian practices that restrict children's autonomy and self-expression and which have traditionally been justified by pointing to children's relative immaturity and their need for socialization."
- participar (art. 12) y su derecho a la libertad de pensamiento, conciencia y religión (art. 14)."

“Parents (and others) should be encouraged to offer ‘direction and guidance’ in a child-centred way, through dialogue and example, in ways that enhance young children’s capacities to exercise their rights, including their right to participation (art. 12) and their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art. 14).”

b) PARTICIPATION IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS

The ultimate aim of child participation is to influence decision-making in matters which directly or indirectly concern them.

Therefore, participation should take place in every setting and scenario in which such decisions are processed and put into practice. In this respect, not only everyday settings such as family, school and community areas, but also institutional settings which children attend in critical situations (related to health or justice), and the public sphere itself, where local, provincial or national decisions are made, acquire importance.

As well as making it possible to take active part in the decision-making processes which occur in these different venues, participation also achieves other objectives, such as:

- That children should learn and exercise skills required for participation, progressing from areas which are close to them and friendly, to those in which adult power attains greater levels of institutional formality.
- That adults, for their part, should develop their skills to listen, receive the contributions of children and recognize that they are valid interlocutors at the moment of making decisions.

The Family

Families have different structures and forms of composition according to the different historical periods, cultures and social enclaves, but there is always some kind of core structure which is distinguished by its particularly strong bonds, where human beings exchange affection and basic care and which operates as a venue for protection and primary socialization for children.

The family is a learning area for forms of relationship and action, it shapes age and gender roles and provides models for being a man, a woman or a child. It is the location in which the models and values which distinguish every culture are transmitted and where children learn to occupy the place assigned to them in the symbolic universe of the group to which they belong. This place will define the behaviour expected of them and the attitudes which others will assume towards them. It is there that the relationship of discretionary authority between adults and children is reproduced, as well as violent forms of resolving conflicts, the more primary forms of subjection; or, conversely, where mutual respect amongst persons is enacted, as well as creative and non-violent ways of processing differences and the daily exercise of respect for the dignity of others.

In order to promote the participation of children within the bosom of their families, it is essential that adults should critically revise the image of a passive and receptive subject child, incapable of contributing to the decisions of adults in keeping with their experience and knowledge, and begin to perceive the true capabilities of children and acknowledge them as subjects of rights who can and must be heeded and heard in all decisions which directly or indirectly affect them.

Public policies for the promotion of rights should set in motion educational and guiding actions for fathers, mothers and other referential adults. These policies come up against the barrier of tradition and the myth of privacy, which rejects all public or state intervention in the family. Despite this, educational institutions have worked with adults on numerous occasions as a way of promoting positive change and enabling the visualization of the potential of children when they are respected as persons.

The participation of children within their families and within the framework of family decision-making dynamics is one of the most significant settings in which the defence of this right should be stressed. It is within their families that children will develop participation during early childhood and the importance afforded to their opinions in collective decisions will be basic for the perception children will obtain about how relevant their viewpoints are. It should be noted that, according to the stipulations of the CRC, although parents should certainly take children's opinions into account, they do not necessarily have to abide by them. In such a case, children should be told the reasons why a different decision is made.

In its General Comment N° 12, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends the States to establish educational programmes for parents in order to promote positive behaviour, work on their current attitudes and disseminate information on children's rights so that they may contribute to developing styles of bringing up children which are respectful of their right to be heard.

Such programmes should bear in mind:

- Relations of mutual respect between parents and children.
- The participation of children in decision-making.
- Giving due weight to the opinions of different members of the family.
- Understanding, promoting and respecting the evolving capabilities of children.
- Forms of processing discrepancies within families.

In present-day developmental psychology, development is no longer considered to be the lineal process of an isolated individual who goes through different phases, but the passage through a variety of places within the structure of the family group. According to this approach, the attitudes of adults shape the personality of a child and act as a reference point when the time comes for the child to take on adult roles. This makes the way in which participation, understood as the child's right to be heard and taken into account, is practised within families, particularly significant.

Educational centres and other institutional venues

School, which in our society is the educational institution par excellence, is the most significant daily venue in the life of children, together with their families. It is there that children come into contact with social and state regulations and values, which do not always fully agree with those they receive and experience in their families.

In this setting, children will encounter one of the greatest barriers to child participation: the hierarchical and vertical distribution of power. Through their contact with officials, teachers and authorities, children confront the experience of relating with adults who exercise institutional power; that is, power which does not derive from the individual, but from the position this individual occupies.

In its General Comment N° 12, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expresses its concern about "continuing authoritarianism, discrimination, disrespect and violence which characterize the reality of many schools and classrooms. Such environments are not conducive to the expression of children's views and the due weight to be given these views."

Beyond their regular school curriculum, every educational institution has a 'hidden curriculum' composed of lessons which children assimilate on the basis of the relationships and experiences which they undergo during their school years. This is a different kind of learning in which children's capacity to explore, to form opinions and to share them with their peers and teachers is valued. Educational institutions thus become a friendly area in which children are accepted and respected as persons.

In some societies, children also attend other kinds of institutions during the course of their everyday lives; generally these institutions are more flexible and less structured in their organization and activities. This is the case of sports, recreational or religious institutions.

It is important to assess how the initiatives of children are considered in these institutions. Whether they are allowed to express their opinions and whether these opinions are taken into account in situations such as:

- The construction of rules for games or other activities.
- The design of disciplinary regulations.
- Organizational proposals and self-organization of activities.
- Forms of dealing with discrepancy or conflict.
- The solution of common problems.
- The search for answers which show solidarity in the face of situations which affect any member of the group or family.

With regard to sports, the competitive forms sometimes adopted in the service of adult interests should be approached with caution. When sport becomes highly competitive it becomes an excluding activity; it is over-demanding and does not fulfil the needs of an individual in the process of development.

It is also interesting to perform a critical analysis of traditional children's games. These games often reproduce traditional values regarding gender roles, dealing with authority and forms of inter-generational relations.

These everyday, seemingly insignificant aspects are particularly important when attempting to propose a cultural transformation based on the places assigned to children, adolescents and adults, and the ways of perceiving relationships between them.

Health institutions merit a separate chapter to themselves. These institutions have traditionally been distinguished by an accumulation of knowledge and power in the hands of technicians, to the detriment of the consideration of the views and opinions of their users.

In recent years there has been a strong movement to transform the health-care model. This new model suggests a different relationship in which communities assume participation with regard to both health self-care and in the supervision and control of services provided. It has been proposed that health care should include quality and warmth; covering both technical and human aspects. In this respect, it seems pertinent to bear in mind the final conclusions of the First Pan American Child Forum with regard to this subject.

- Increase the number of health-care professionals and centres in order to promote the provision of care for children in a situation of risk or exclusion (children who live with HIV/AIDS, teenage mothers and teenage drug dependents).
- We need sexual education programmes.

This movement, which can be summarized by the phrase 'the democratization of health', is not only about accessibility and equity, but also about destructuring and modifying the power relations which commonly surround health-care and its institutions. As usual in all democratization movements, children are not mentioned – and often not included – in these transformations.

Children have a right to be informed about their health; information they receive should be clear, comprehensible and real, so that children can form their own views about what is happening to them and the meaning of the procedures to which they are subjected.

When confronted with the services of health care, children maintain and should exercise all of their rights and it is the responsibility of their families, health-care staff and the State to promote them in every specific situation they must undergo.

In educational settings, the right of children to be heard covers all school matters which directly or indirectly affect them, from the design of recreational areas to the design of the study plan. The experience of exercising power in school is a key element in the understanding which a child can achieve regarding the exercise of power in society.

Participation in the community

Although there are many definitions of community, for the purpose of this paper we shall understand the term to mean a social tissue embedded in a specific territory in which individuals share a significant part of the activities and exchanges which are part of their daily lives. Community implies a sense of belonging on the part of its members and, at the same time, recognition on the part of the collective group of the membership each individual enjoys. It includes a variety of settings and significant relationships, services and specific or stable exchanges between its members.

Local participation tends to be promoted in these settings as a way of collectively confronting the problems and concerns which affect the community. The position children occupy in such participation is critical. Children tend to construct their own areas spontaneously and are not always considered by adults to be part of the existing organized centres of the community.

The promotion of child participation within the community has two dimensions. On the one hand, strengthening and recognizing children's own settings, and on the other, including them in inter-generational settings where dialogue between children and adults is possible in conditions of mutual respect. It is in the community that networks of human solidarity which provide support for children and their families take root through neighbourhood relationships which broaden, support and enrich family bonds.

Policies for the promotion of child participation find a privileged scenario in the community for the development of activities which achieve an impact on families and institutions simultaneously.

In the Querétaro Forum conclusions, the States are required to "Promote participation within a framework of a social and comprehensive services network on the basis of a territorial and decentralized comprehensive protection approach which will strengthen the organization of children and young people and generate conditions for social mobilization and action".

The main problem is not that children do not have the skills to participate actively, but that adults do not accept, value and empower these abilities. Therefore, it is essential for the States to "implement programmes, projects, means and areas which will lead to the recognition of the contribution of participation in the construction of children's own life projects, within the framework of inter-generational and community dialogue which will provide sustainability to these life projects." (Queretaro, 2008)

Participation in the public sphere

"Consultative Councils should be formed at local, regional, national and Inter-American levels in order to incorporate the words, needs and proposals of children, including those who have special needs and skills, in the construction and implementation of public policies to be executed by the authorities." (First Pan American Forum – Lima 2009)

The public sphere is characterized by access provided to organized groups of children to discussion opportunities with state and non-state, provincial or national civic authorities. Under such circumstances it is particularly important to guarantee the authenticity of this dialogue, both in the stands which children assume and transmit and in the listening and interpretation carried out by the authorities.

One indicator of how a State views this right is the existence of rules which regulate periodic consultations performed amongst children, on subjects which concern them, such as educational and recreational issues, town-planning, protection policies and other matters which affect their lives.

The Querétaro Declaration is clear when it asks the States to "Establish means of interlocution, political incidence and decision-making at different territorial levels, such as national, departmental, municipal and international consultative councils."

Rajan suggests a series of points to bear in mind when choosing areas to serve as venues for experiences related to policies and strategies for the promotion of participation. He proposes selecting settings which:

- Will highly influence the development of capabilities.
- Will facilitate access to a larger number of interested persons.
- Will ensure the existence of equity in the participation experience.
- Will reach vulnerable sectors.
- Will have greater impact on everyday aspects of participants' lives.
- Will maximize opportunities for making decisions amongst participants.
- Are sustainable in the long term.
- Are susceptible to evaluation and monitoring in the long term.
- Offer the potential for development for the organization where the participatory process takes place.

Participation in international events

One of the indications of the growing relevance which international organizations and States are assigning to child participation is the presence of children in international events and meetings. Since the 1990 World Summit for Children in New York, children have increasingly been involved in international events and meetings in which their rights and welfare are discussed. Even though this can be viewed as a sign that their right to participation is recognized, we should acknowledge that these events are organized by adults and do not always provide the appropriate guarantees for autonomous participation.

This concern has led the Inter Agency Working Group on Children's Participation (2007) to draw up a set of minimum standards for consulting with children. This publication warns about adult control over such matters as:

- The resources required for children to attend.
- The topics of discussion.
- The agenda and procedures of the meeting.
- The selection process.
- The topics on which children are asked to give their opinions.

To these it adds other problems detected in the assessment of a variety of experiences:

- Selection processes that were not always transparent or representative.
- Negative or paternalistic attitudes among adults.
- Inadequate preparation of children for their roles in the forums.
- Risks arising from organizational errors.
- Lack of follow-up after the events.
- Over-stimulation arising from contact with different realities.

Participation in such events leads to highly positive effects with regard to adults acquiring experience in respecting the capabilities of children, in raising public awareness of the value of their opinions, in generating opportunities for exchange amongst children of different nationalities and cultures. However, experience has shown that participatory activities which take place close to a child's place of residence develop more smoothly and with a greater degree of sustainability. For international consultations to be effective, they must be based on previous local processes.

The standards proposed by the Inter Agency Working Group cover the periods before, during and after the consultation. They attempt at all times to establish minimum levels of coherence between participatory discourse and the practices and attitudes of the adults involved. Participation should be surrounded by guarantees of quality in order to avoid lapsing into merely decorative levels, in which children become mascots rather than genuine participants.

c) PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC POLICY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF VULNERABILITY

Participation is recognized as a principle and a right of all children with no exceptions of any kind, it should be present at the different levels of intervention which constitute a strategy for the comprehensive protection of children.

At this point, we shall refer to the levels of intervention proposed by the “Ibero-American Programme for the Strengthening of Systems for the Comprehensive Protection of Children”. (Government of Chile, 2008)

Despite the heterogeneous nature which distinguishes childhood protection systems in Ibero-American countries, this document identifies three levels of intervention for policies:

- First level of intervention: Universal policies aimed at childhood as a whole.
- Second level of intervention: Mitigation policies tending towards reducing the impact of situations of vulnerability, or of the violation of a right or a group of rights.
- Third level of intervention: Specialized policies aimed at reverting existing violations.

As they advance, the levels acquire a greater degree of complexity and, at the same time, apply to more reduced and limited populations. The objective of any intervention is to achieve a mobility which will permit the passage to less complex levels, while promoting inclusion in services of universal access. There should be public policies for the protection and promotion of the right to participation at the three levels of intervention.

At the first level, training for participation and the effective exercise of this right should reach all children and be promoted in different settings through which children pass during the several stages of their development. As educational institutions constitute good places to reach and work with families and the community, they are potential coordinators of these actions. At this level, participatory areas must be inclusive and promote the inclusion of children from different social settings, with particular care to include the presence of children from vulnerable sectors. They represent an opportunity to break down the discriminatory behaviour which is so entrenched in the ‘adult world’.

At the second level, the active participation of children whose rights are threatened constitutes a protective factor, promotes strengthening, increases self-esteem and develops social skills which lead to social inclusion.

Something similar, but more specific, occurs at the third level, where institutional interventions tend to inhibit social, expressive and creative skills. Participation is a way to overcome welfare positions and interventions imbued with social control; it allows children and young people to defend their rights, develop organizational skills and cooperate in the necessary institutional transformations.

The States must guarantee the participation of children who are deprived of parental care, as well as of those whose rights have been violated, as an essential step in the process of social inclusion.

It is enriching for children under care through actions at the second and third levels to take part in participatory events with children in their same situation and at the same time, be fully included in areas in which other children participate. This allows children to strengthen their self-esteem, share common interests and confront the situations they undergo. This strengthening should allow children to be incorporated into heterogeneous areas as a step towards full inclusion and access to universal policies.

The inclusion of children at a specific level of intervention should be a dynamic event linked to the processes of participation and inclusion. In this respect, it is possible to refer to a process which includes entitlement, awareness-raising, training for participation, the promotion of resilience, empowerment (strengthening) and protagonism, with constant feed-back and cross-cutting in a ‘two-way’ communication process (contribution made by El Salvador, 2009).

4. Factors which facilitate and factors which inhibit participation

The construction of a participatory society stipulates that one of the central tasks should be the revision of old paradigms and conceptions regarding childhood which view children as objects of protection and care.

An adult with experience in facilitating participatory processes has said that: "We are still faced with the task of breaking down the prejudices which still prevail amongst adults with regard to the capabilities of children to transform reality, or to influence the possibility of changing realities. This prejudice is based on a vision of childhood which we adults have still not overcome, even when we are promoters or workers of organizations committed to supporting the participatory processes of children." (Cuenca meeting, 2004)

Such a statement from someone who is trained and committed to the new paradigm leads us to suggest that, when identifying and categorizing inhibiting and facilitating factors of child participation, we should bear in mind two levels which are closely related but methodologically separable.

On the one hand, the social, cultural and political aspects which distinguish the context children come from and in which they live. On the other, the resources and methodological precautions used to develop these experiences. We should consider the perceptions and practices which imbue the social tissue and daily context which surrounds the experience.

A participatory social network which values the inclusive protagonism of all citizens, where children can see their elders participating on different occasions, operates as a model which facilitates experiences. To this is added the position and value afforded to children in that culture, community or society.

If, conversely, we face a social context in which authoritarianism and passiveness towards collective problems prevail, children will have had no facilitating experiences. In such situations there is a risk that they will be trapped in 'conflicting message' situations. That is, at school children are told they must give their opinions, that their views matter and that they should say what they think about problems. Whereas in the family they are told it is bad manners to answer back, that they are too young to give an opinion on adult matters.

Let us look at an example of this: a child returns home from school and his mother asks, "How was your day" The child answers with enthusiasm: "My friends and I are organizing ourselves to change some things. We are going to discuss the rules and how breaks are organized."

Next day the mother goes to the teacher and shows her concern about "her son's exploits" and says, "I know he is a little disobedient. If he gets cocky, you put him in his place."

Actions which promote child participation should be accompanied by interventions which facilitate understanding and acceptance on the part of the adults in children's settings, be they at institutional, family or community levels. The problem is not that children do not learn or undertake their right to participate responsibly, but that adults should accept, value, respect their opinions and learn to coexist with children who view themselves as active members of the community.

a) CONDITIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

Participatory experiences are not self-contained but also constitute learning opportunities for children, as well as for the adults who take on the role of promoters or facilitators, and for the community as a whole, inasmuch as it discovers the potential of children when they are treated as persons.

We should take care that they do not become frustrating experiences giving rise to a loss of motivation and a strengthening of negative attitudes. Children give the best of themselves in these experiences, and this constitutes a responsibility for accompanying adults and organizations.

Save the Children (2008) maintains that it is important for participation to be surrounded by certain guarantees and therefore must be:

- Genuine and significant
- Voluntary and with informed consent
- Non-discriminatory, inclusive, egalitarian and equitable
- Promotional of recreation, learning, safety and protection
- Carried out in appropriate and friendly environments
- Cross-sectional in the decision-making process: diagnostics, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

We should be aware of the importance these experiences entail for children. They should be pleasurable and creative; children and adults should be able to build relationships of respect and trust, with no room for manipulation, arbitrariness or deception.

In the document quoted above, Plan Peru states that, "child participation should be protagonistic and inclusive, free and voluntary for all children in their areas of interest, in the home, school, community and in public and political life. It should be individual, collective or organized, and value and recognize differences of culture, condition and specific situation".

Plan Peru's document continues saying that: "This implies acknowledging children as subjects of rights and also constitutes a commitment to facilitating their self-awareness as citizens who are capable of promoting and demanding the fulfilment of their rights (which also implies the awareness of all social actors involved: parents, children, social leaders, authorities, teachers, community organizations, public, private, religious and third sector institutions), generating alternative proposals, participating in decision-making, taking social control, etc. The protagonism of children entails the support and involvement of adults in a cooperative role. This approach complements the rights-based approach, and community development focused on children, gender, risk management and inter-culturality."

With this approach to child participation, Plan Peru claims to have distanced itself from any approach, model and paradigm which is based on a representation of childhood as a social sector replete with problems and needs, a mere target for the care and protection provided by the State and adult civil society, with expressions of participation which are controlled, predictable and manipulated by adults.

And further on: "Our approach also allows us to distance ourselves from any attempt to appropriate or institutionalize expressions of child participation by public, private and international organizations. Plan Peru does not endorse appropriation or imposition – the power of the logo in the face of forms of child participation."

In his conference on occasion of the Twentieth Pan American Child Congress, held recently in Lima, Peru, David Calderón alerts us to the need for participation to transcend the forms and spaces provided by States and institutions:

"There is a risk of inversion – of perverting – social logic when State agencies condition the possible responses of the beneficiaries of their programmes. Participation is not what regulations 'validate' or 'allow', but an individual's own

evolution which must first recognize itself in the regulatory framework and then guard, defend and foster itself through institutions.”

“In no case should participation be presented as something allowed or recommended by the authorities, something which facilitates or complements their tasks, which legitimizes or benefits their programmes, but as something which the holders of the right – children and young people, represented or supported by their parents and their communities – enjoy as a legitimate priority and aspiration. Thus, in any present or future institutional agreement, communities – of parents, localities, OCS and its networks – should retain the freedom of initiative to seek interlocution and to call on the authorities at any moment.”

“Social participation... is a right from which benefits should emerge for all participants.”

Calderón proposes advancing towards improved – deep, exact and wide – understanding of participation:

“It is ‘deep’ when it is perceived in its anthropological and ethical roots, in its fundamental condition with regard to citizenship, when it is connected to a will to overcome historical barriers. Genuine child participation activates democracy as a way of life, and not merely as a mechanism for voting and for formal deliberation. It promotes an associative way of life, with the progressive expansion of the group which participates in a common interest.”

“It enables referring one’s own actions to those of others and those of others to one’s own, contributing to the gradual suppression of barriers to achieve full meaning in one’s own life. Deep down, participation is the distinguishing element of citizens, since to be a citizen – in the words of José Bernardo Toro – is to live like... a person who is capable, in cooperation with others, of creating or transforming the social order he or she wishes to live in, comply with and protect, for the dignity of all. To be a citizen implies understanding (...) that if the existing order does not give rise to dignity, it can be transformed, or a new one created, in cooperation with all.”

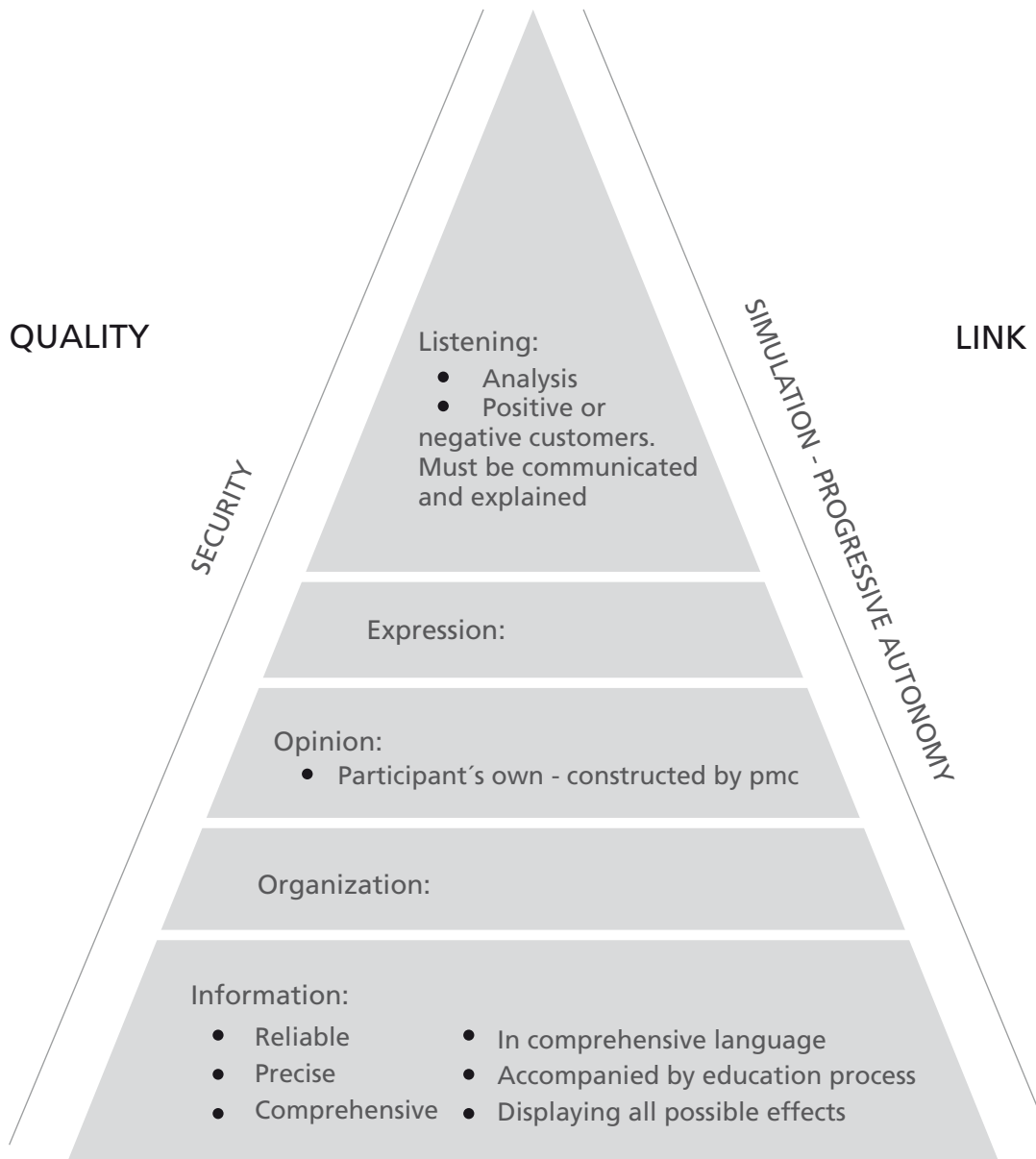
“Understanding of participation is ‘exact’ when there is recognition that it leads to social transformation, that it has political validity. Understanding it in this way is acknowledging that children are not limited to a vulnerable population to care for, but that they are also, and at the same time, social subjects with a contribution to make; they are capable of listening to others, they have the right to change their opinions and can recognize otherness, respect it and include it. We are able to establish, even though we do not proceed to the last consequences, that children are clearly capable of seeking consensus in a setting in which dissent is not a cause for division or a denial of dialogue.”

“It is ‘exact’ if we assume that it is not only about giving opinions, but also about acting, even beyond typical or prescribed forms. Participation should be active; that is, a kind of participation which is not established (as in users of a service) or predetermined (by the donation of resources), but in which individuals become involved in a process which can go from determining what is being offered to the implementation and management of policies, actions or programmes. It is, therefore, a participation which assumes the existence of social responsibility, commitment, transparency, joint work (‘we’) and not the sum of individualities, which is translated into the capacity to decide and act.”

“Understanding of participation is ‘wide’ when it recognizes everyday life and locality as starting points, when it is framed within a continuous learning process, when it is viewed as building community and when it leads to public policy and justice.”

“A broad perception of participation enables us to see that it is a permanent and perfectible dynamic, but installs itself in the closest of settings, is rooted in the everyday life of any given community. From above and from the outside, participation initiatives can be frustrated in their good intentions. Therefore, and overcoming the eventuality we have disparaged, it is families, schools, towns or neighbourhoods that are the primary areas for the most authentic kind of participation.”

The following chart, contributed by Costa Rica, makes it possible to visualize the different components of the participatory process as well as the inter-relationships between them.



The Government of the United States of America, in its paper, "Putting Positive Youth Development into Practice", makes useful contributions with regard to desirable characteristics for youth participation and how to promote it.

Positive Youth Development Features	How to Implement Them
Physical and psychological safety and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Put the program in a school - Work with the local police - Provide chaperones/shuttle vans - Develop codes of conduct between peers
Structure that is developmentally appropriate, with clear expectations, increasing opportunities to make decisions and to take on leadership roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Post written rules/create a rule handbook - Use team concepts in planning activities - Allow youth to evaluate the program - Put youth on the Board
Emotional and moral support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listen, listen, listen - Reward small accomplishments - Take an interest in youth's other activities - Ask older kids to mentor younger kids
Opportunities to experience supportive adult relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Program adult-youth time into each day - Encourage all staff to seek interactions - Get kids outside of their peer comfort zone - Develop small group activities
Opportunities to learn how to form close, durable human relationships with peers who support and reinforce healthy behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conduct teamwork activities - Ask youth to plan and run activities - Teach conflict resolution - Model close, trusting relationships
Opportunities to feel a sense of belonging and being valued	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hand out t-shirts, etc. with program logo - Ask older youth to mentor younger kids - Ask youth to give back to the program - Maintain alumni groups, open-door policy
Opportunities to develop positive social values and norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide time for meaningful discussions with good role models - Teach peer conflict resolution - Hold prevention workshops/role playing
Opportunities for skill building and mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote 'learning by doing' - Collaborate with groups that offer advanced skill building in many areas - Provide chances to learn from mistakes

Positive Youth Development Features	How to Implement Them
Opportunities to develop confidence in their abilities to master their environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep expectations modest - Break down goals into small steps - Talk about your own challenges - Don't be afraid to let them fail
Opportunities to make a contribution to their community and to develop a sense of mattering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allow them to make decisions about what would improve the community - Provide opportunities to volunteer - Ask youth to conduct community mapping
Strong links between families, schools, and broader community resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Include parents in program decisions - Care about how ALL youth are doing - Collaborate with other local groups - Work with policymakers

Participation can also be learned

We understand participation to be a learning process which must be promoted from the basic institutions which include children, such as families, schools and communities. Participate is what children do every day.

Participation can be viewed as a process with different stages: access to information, shaping one's own opinion and the chance to express it to others, who will listen and take it into account when making decisions.

All participation practices should promote the recognition and empowerment of children's rights, in the affirmation that participation is not just another right, but a right which cuts across all of the others. (contribution by Argentina, 2009)

When we live in societies with a strong authoritarian background and disregard for the opinions of others, the promotion of participation cannot be limited to providing areas in which children can participate spontaneously. We would run the risk of reproducing the models of adult-child relationships, manipulation on the part of adults and imitation of adults on the part of children.

Satisfying the potential of children as full citizens requires deconstructing a series of traditional representations and practices.

These not only exist amongst adults, but are also incorporated amongst children, owing to their experience of elements which inhibit and distort their potential for participation. Participating implies learning to express differences with respect, listening to others, being responsible in one's statements and proposals, knowing how to represent and be represented. It implies abilities, tools, regulations, values and learning.

Promoting participation requires policies and measures to encourage it, which stimulate potential, guide and educate in the shapes participation acquires and the values which sustain it. This is the foundation of the statement that: "participation can also be learned". (PROPIA 2008)

Questions thus arise: How can it be learned? Where can it be learned? What role do adults and institutions play in this learning process?

Participation is learned through experience. Without disregarding the importance of including the principle/right to participation in education on rights, as well as in school texts and programmes, learning to participate is not merely being informed about the concepts, treaties and legal texts. It is assimilating as a living experience the sense of belonging to collective areas where individual opinions are important, where certain rules must be complied with so that everyone can express him or herself freely, where it is often necessary to accept decisions which do not fully coincide with one's own wishes, but reflect a position taken by a collective group which included us, listened to us and exchanged opinions with us in order to arrive at this decision.

It includes dialogical learning in which children learn together with the adults who interact with them, and with other children and adults who participate indirectly in these experiences, discovering that other forms of inter-generational relations are possible, that providing children with a different positioning is not synonymous with chaos, but a different order which contributes to improving the quality of life for all.

Diego Pólit (2007) has described the educational tasks which must take place during the construction of participatory coexistence, which must be based on:

- Encouraging people to express their own points of view regarding the situation of their families, schools, neighbourhoods and communities and supporting them so that they can identify the positive and negative elements in this situation.
 - Helping people to recognize in themselves the capabilities and the right to carry out transformations; and supporting them in the search for and construction of their own solutions as part of the educational task.
 - Convincing people to recognize that other individuals with whom they share their lives may have their own, different, opinions and viewpoints regarding the same realities, and supporting them so that they can exchange ideas and together build better forms of coexistence.
 - Encouraging people to confront and question their own viewpoints in the light of what other people, with whom they exchange ideas, are proposing, in the light of the proposals of children, and in the light of what the educators or facilitators and the project material may contribute to the discussion. Providing support so that they may reconstruct and put in practice new forms of coexistence on the basis of this confrontation.
- Encouraging adults to acknowledge that children are also persons with their own opinions and feelings, and that they have the skills and the right to participate in the family, school and community, and providing support so that they may jointly build forms of relationship which will make life more pleasant, decent and fair for all.

Ultimately, the idea is to foster a critical analysis of daily life, deconstructing authoritarian forms of behaviour which disregard the right to expression and participation of all, and promoting instead the construction of new forms of relationship based on the respect for the dignity and rights of all.

b) TRAINING ADULT PROMOTERS

All the literature we have consulted agrees that in order to promote participation it is essential for adults to understand and accept that children are persons who are capable of thinking, reflecting and giving their views on what is taking place in the groups and institutions which they are part of. This understanding should not be limited to the level of discourse but should be put into practice when the opinions of children differ from those of adults; they must be capable of listening, of providing opportunities for reflection, of putting 'their certainties on hold', in order to enable genuine democratic interaction.

Linares (2000) sustains that it is necessary to make a constant revision of processes through criticism and self-criticism, in order to avoid, amongst other things, the common tendency amongst adults to think and act in the name of children and, on occasions, to "put our thoughts into their minds and our words into their mouths".

If we understand the right to participation as a process which is developed in all areas of the lives of children; in the family, school and community, it is necessary for responsible adults in these areas to recognize, facilitate and stimulate this right on a daily basis. Participation cannot be the exclusive territory of specialists, but must cut across and pervade all of the activities and work areas which include children and teens. Hence the need for a more generalized training for all persons who work with children.

Local governments should have programmes in order to disseminate and promote this new institutionality.

At the same time, the position of promoter should be considered for areas which focus specifically on children, so that participation can be exercised.

To begin with, this individual should receive technical training based on the promotion of all of the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and, above all, on the right to participation.

In addition, he or she should be provided with methodological tools which facilitate group work, favouring interaction and communication amongst participants (contribution made by Argentina 2009).

The NGO CINDE-Colombia has listed a series of principles which guided the child participation training process within the New Voices for Citizens Programme (Programa Nuevas Voces Ciudadanas). Some of the most noteworthy are:

- Training for participation is not a technical process carried out by experts. It is a process of transformation in the coexistence which takes place amongst equals, on the basis of their differences.
- Training is not prescriptive but reconstructive.
- Games and the language of artistic expression are not educational tools, but the languages which foster communicational events and the construction of meaning between individuals.

The process of training in participation makes it possible for trainers to renounce the desire to “put our thoughts into their heads and our words into their mouths”.

The systematization of the New Voices for Citizens Programme (CINDE-Colombia) lists pedagogical principles to enable putting oneself in a child's place.

- The training plan seeks to broaden the capacity for reflection and action of trainers.
- Participation is not discourse, it is a practice which comes to life both in the training area and within the project team.
- The daily lives of the persons involved become visible during the training process.
- Training occurs on the basis of what each individual is and what each individual has.
- Creativity is a social asset.

“A critical element in all child participation processes is the relationship established between adults (who may be given different names: consultant, guardian, cooperator, etc.) and the children themselves in the experiences or projects. This is an essential matter which must be borne in mind, since it is on the basis of the type and quality of the relationship between these actors that the different forms and approaches of child participation will be generated” (Espinar, A.).

The old saying, “do as I say but not as I do”, helps to illustrate this tangled set of problems. Adults operate before children as ‘alternative models’ to other adults who exercise unilateral power over them. They must therefore transmit credibility through the existence of coherence between what they do and what they preach.

The nature of the relationship between children and adults within the framework of projects or participatory experiences substantially determines the evolution of such processes, as well as their impact and formative effect on participants.

An analysis of practices observed shows some deviations or inappropriate forms of operation which are not in keeping with the aims, principles and values of participatory experiences:

- Adults who show, through some specific attitudes and particularly on the most critical occasions, that they are not genuinely willing to share their power.
- Adults who are not able to handle situations in which children question their attitudes, both in their roles as facilitators and in daily life.
- Adults who believe that, because they are taking part in a participatory event, they can renounce their condition as adults and act as if they were children. The idea is not only to 'let children do', but provide them with tools, support the processes and accompany them in the construction of new forms of relationship which are sustainable in different scenarios.
- Adults who forget their responsibilities and attempt to transfer them to children renouncing their status as adults.

According to the experience of PROPIA, the Uruguayan Child Participation Programme, participation promoters (ProPar) should bear in mind the following aspects:

1. **Promoting participation**, in the understanding that as well as being a right, it develops the capacity of individuals to work in cooperation with others. For this to be possible there are three steps to remember: **Information, Opinion and Listening**.
2. **Fostering the supply of information regarding their rights**. The stage during which children receive information about their rights, how to exercise them and the responsibility which the exercise of any right implies, is, in our view, an essential aspect of participation.
3. **Promoting the opinions of children**. To generate the appropriate means and devices in order to encourage in children the possibility of forming their own opinions and give their views on the subjects which affect them.
4. **Listening to children**. This implies
 - Giving children a voice. Their views, hopes and aspirations rarely find an audience or produce a response.
 - Promoting practical means of participation.

Mediation has its risks and some of them are related to:

- **Control**. The rights of children could be limited and restricted beyond their progressive autonomy.
- **Filtering**. Adults could refuse to transmit some of the children's proposals
- **Modification**. As a mediator, an adult might have the opportunity to 'falsify' or 'modify' information.

According to Horna Castro (2006), a facilitator or educator must be able handle a methodology which includes at least the following:

- A consideration of participants' previous experience
- The capacity to allow and facilitate the participation of all
- An optimization of the achievement of the objectives proposed without sacrificing the group process
- The promotion of individual and collective output
- Flexibility in the face of changes and situations which may arise
- The capacity to favour interaction and communication amongst participants
- Techniques and dynamics which are appropriate to the age and characteristics of the participants, avoiding giving rise to disconnection from the processes of analysis and reflection. (Horna Castro, P, 2006)

For its part, Save the Children has highlighted some of the precautions which should be taken when participation occurs within collective events or consultations:

- Ensure that group conclusions are the result of a democratic process in which all opinions have been heard and taken seriously.
- Bear in mind that lengthy interventions are not conducive to communication.
- Presentations in other venues should be a reflection of collective work with a good level of participation, so that children feel that they are represented in the collective output.

5. Indicators for the exercise of the right to participation

The commitment undertaken by the Party States when they ratified the Convention, as well as all other related treaties and declarations, entails the implementation of active policies which will guarantee the exercise of children's rights, amongst which is the principle/right to participation.

These commitments give rise to a series of queries:

How do the States report on the activities which have taken place in the promotion of this principle/right?

What signs can the international community view as an indication of the 'political will' of the States and their governments to promote a culture of participation which includes children?

When can we consider that a process, programme or experience is participatory, or tends to encourage participation?

The accountability of rights requires precise, reliable and accessible information on the situation of children's rights. This implies the existence of information systems, observatories and means of citizen surveillance at national, regional and international levels.

The need to have tools available which facilitate an adequate quantitative and qualitative diagnosis of the progress achieved and difficulties encountered by the Party States and their respective societies in the implementation of the CRC has been a cause for concern for international organizations and forums.

In early 2002, the IIN carried out an analysis of the report submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child by four countries in Latin America, which led to the following findings:

- A lack of systematic follow-up to the comments and recommendations issued by the Committee.
- An absence of orderly, reliable and current information to which it is possible to obtain access with relative ease.
- A lack of common criteria amongst the countries, and even amongst the different organizations within the same country, in defining 'indicators' and working accordingly.
- As a result of this, a lack of a reliable system of indicators which can be applied by different actors and in different countries.

It is not enough to theorize about which indicators would best reflect the extent of progress regarding a right or group of rights. Reliable sources must be available, as well as consolidated, systematized and updated information, so that it is possible to gain access to it in real time in order to visualize the progress of processes and the impact on them of activities, measures and events which may occur, be they intentional or fortuitous. We refer to intentional activities and measures as part of policies and strategies designed and implemented by States. Fortuitous events are those which without being part of a policy for children, have an impact on children's rights. Such is the case of economic crises, the break-down of democracy, armed conflicts and natural catastrophes, to name only a few.

After only a cursory analysis of existing literature on the subject, we have seen the need to differentiate between two types of 'indicator systems' applied at different levels and in different situations.

On the one hand there are 'indicator systems' which attempt to show the efforts of the Party States to promote, protect or re-establish the right to child participation in the different settings of children's lives.

On the other, it is no less important to have 'indicator systems' which have been agreed and which make it possible to determine with a certain degree of objectivity whether a programme, process or experience is participatory, or whether it is in the process of promoting participation, or, conversely, whether we are in the presence of a form of pseudo-participation or any other form which reproduces adult control and tutelage over children.

a) INDICATORS OF THE STATES' COMMITMENT TO THE PROMOTION OF PARTICIPATION

The IIN has suggested in one of its papers (2009), some elements that Party States should bear in mind when drafting their country reports for the Committee on the Rights of the Child, with regard to child participation (see Appendix). The paper does not strictly refer to indicators, but to aspects to bear in mind. These elements are organized into four areas:

1) Rules and regulations. This refers to the explicit mention of the right to participation in laws, decrees and ministerial agreements. Specifications are included regarding settings and processes in which children have a right to give their opinions, be heard or take part in decision-making.

2) The existence of policies, plans and programmes which enable putting the regulatory body into operation. This includes means of consultation, plans and programmes, means of evaluation and follow-up, programmes which promote participation in everyday life, training for adults as enablers of participation, the promotion of democratic inter-generational relations and actions which promote a culture of respect for rights.

3) Actors who are present in participatory processes: the State, children, adults who share their daily lives, community institutions and organizations, other actors such as the media, businesses, trade unions and others.

4) Budgetary considerations:

Is child participation provided for in national, municipal or institutional budgets?

Is child participation provided for in the production of these or other budgets?

Are there stipulations which require companies to contribute to public funds aimed at promoting participation?

In a 2004 publication entitled, "The systematization of information on the rights of the child", the IIN proposes categorizing these rights into eight groups. The right to participation was grouped together with the right to expression and information.

The indicators proposed are similar to those described when attempting their quantification: number of educational programmes, children who participate in these programmes, opportunities provided for consultation with children, number of children consulted in the design of the National Plan for children, awareness-raising campaigns.

The inclusion of participation together with the right to opinion and information leads to policies regarding the media acquiring particular significance. Are there venues in which children can express their ideas and opinions? Are informative and formative programmes aimed at children promoted?

These indicator systems reflect, in the best of cases, the efforts made by the States. They give an account of the laws drafted and the resources allocated, but there can be a great distance between these and any progress which may exist in daily life, in changes regarding the recognition of the citizenship of children in family, institutional and community areas. These indicators do not show the impact of activities which are recorded and quantified.

b) INDICATOR SYSTEMS FOR THE EVALUATION OF PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES AND EXPERIENCES

In view of the many different views regarding what participation consists of, it becomes necessary to find an instrument which will facilitate, relatively objectively and compatibly, an evaluation of how participatory a plan, programme or specific experience is, or to what extent participation is encouraged. Objectivity and compatibility are related to the possibility of arriving at similar conclusions independently of the observers who apply the instrument.

The literature consulted so far provides a few elements which can guide us in the construction of such an instrument. In Save the Children's paper on "The participation of children fifteen years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child", under the heading of "Participation Indicators", a series of focal points are suggested on the basis of which to construct indicators which will make it possible to organize a review of experiences which claim to be participatory.

Any construction of indicators should be based on a clear conceptualization of the evaluation target. After establishing this concept, the paper proposes an identification of dimensions, and on the basis of these, the definition of observable indicators. Save the Children's study proposes three dimensions:

- **OPINION** (promoted, shared and heard by decision-makers; taken seriously)
- **DECISION MAKING** (mediated, direct, relevant subjects)
- **ACTION** (the extent of inclusion in actions, cultural, political, instrumental levels)

Bearing in mind the characteristics and determining factors of the quality of participation which we have seen in the literature, during the evaluation an attempt should be made to obtain reliable information in answer to questions such as:

- What information do 'participating' children have access to with regard to the meaning, objectives and intentions of the programme?
- Do the children have their own views with regard to the experience they are 'participating' in?
- Is it possible to state that their participation is voluntary and conscious?
- Are their opinions heard and taken seriously by adults?
- What is the significance of the participation venue in participating children's lives?
- Is it part of, or included in their daily lives, or, to the contrary, is it an 'artificial' area created solely in order to experience participation? If such is the case, what possibilities are generated of transferring the experience to other venues?
- Are the opinions expressed by children borne in mind in the construction of significant decisions? What is the setting for such decisions?
- How do the adults involved in the process perceive it? Do their views reflect the recognition of children as individuals who are capable of forming their own judgment?
- How are differences of opinion handled?
- When these experiences are evaluated and, eventually, reprogrammed, what place is given to children's opinions?
- What levels of dissemination and repercussion in the media do participatory programmes and processes achieve?
- What is the impact of these experiences on the social representation of children?

One aspect which should be noted is the central focus which the words of the participants themselves should be given in the evaluation process of participation experiences. In several of the texts consulted this focus is blurred, which implies a technocratic and, paradoxically, non-participatory conception of evaluation.

Although the difficulties which all studies recognize in defining a precise and reliable system of indicators are related to the difficulty in obtaining systematized information, it must not be overlooked that this reflects the lack of an agreed definition which would make it possible to determine with a certain degree of objectivity, what conditions a certain experience must fulfil to be considered participatory. Until this lack of a definition is overcome, any legal or programmatic mandate which refers to participation will provide an excessively broad area of interpretation open to adult discretion.

6. Participation from the point of view of children

“We are very proud of the children’s meeting, of this proposal, because we never used to do this” (Declaration of the Children of Paraguay, 2009).

The mandate for the production of a framework of reference issued by the Quito meeting pays tribute to the contribution of children. In addition, this guideline is closely connected to the theoretical and ethical framework we have been developing.

However, the papers studied include hardly any of the contributions of the participants. The declarations of Cuenca (2004), Querétaro (2007) and Quito (2009) which we have mentioned above are the first documents within the OAS system which include the opinions and points of view of participating children. Even so, the materials they contain do not make it possible to systematize an appraisal of participation by the children themselves.

Andel Espinar (2005) in a Save the Children publication entitled “The shared exercise of power”, Andel Espinar points to the existence of different perceptions on the part of children. Participation is linked to the expression of ideas through words or actions; to the realization of activities (helping, cooperating); to the recognition of rights (to be informed, give opinions, organize themselves, decide, and act according to their own convictions without being obliged to do so). These ‘appraisals’ are somewhat concurrent with adult interpretations in which a kind of ‘not yet’ notion remains, with relation to a supposed immaturity, a participation through assigned actions or achieving an awareness of their rights and organizational capacity. Children appear to be defending their capabilities in view of the lack of recognition on the part of adults.

In 2005, Save the Children published a report on a study carried out a year earlier with children between the ages of 10 and 15 in five Latin American countries. Amongst the younger children, participation seems to be related to opinions, to speaking and to making presentations at school. Older children handle more abstract values: the notion of collective activities, the rules of organization, negotiation as a way of dealing with decisions. The most noteworthy element amongst all of the participants in the study is the idea of a group and its characteristics: to listen, to exchange, to do things cooperatively.

The statements of the children with regard to their experiences tend to reflect a feeling of enjoyment. They enjoy being listened to, being able to express themselves, feeling valued as people.

A participatory venue appears to be an area populated by peers and friendly adults, with respectful forms of communication, in which words have value and information empowers. An environment of trust is established, with no room for lies, fear or embarrassment. There is a relationship between embarrassment, lying and the perception of not being accepted or respected as one is. Children who are discriminated against or who come from violent families are those who most display those contrasts.

In September 2009, in Lima (Peru), the First Pan American Child Forum was celebrated, together with the Twentieth Pan American Child Congress. Sixty-one children participated, representing twenty-two American nations. They worked for three days, collectively, with the support of facilitators and using techniques and methodological resources which facilitated communication and led to the production of a summary of their opinions, contributions and points of view.

The Forum's final recommendations provide an indication of how the participants perceived participation:

- Adults must rid themselves of the notion that we children have difficulty in expressing ourselves, that we are not capable of creating productive things and that we do not have sufficient knowledge to participate. Because of this notion, they impose things on us, rather than promoting or encouraging our participation.
- Consultative Councils should be formed at local, regional, national and Inter-American levels in order to incorporate the words, opinions, needs and proposals of children, including those who have special needs and skills, in the construction and implementation of public policies to be executed by the highest authorities.
- Child participation experiences which take place in our countries should be shared.
- The participation of persons with special capabilities and needs should be promoted.
- Suitable public areas should be implemented for the participation of all children, favouring recreation, culture, play and expression/communication.
- People who associate with children should be educated and made aware of the rights of children and of the promotion of participation.
- The State should provide assistance to families and develop campaigns promoting appropriate methodologies for parents to develop a more open attitude and listen to their children, allowing them to give their opinions on subjects which affect them and their families.
- Early stimulation areas should be created or improved in order to foster the participation of children between 0 and 5 years of age.
- The rights of children should be included in school curricula, to be taught by means of experiential methodologies.
- Conditions of employment for adults should be improved and guaranteed in order to improve the quality of life of their families.
- The number of health-care professionals and centres should be increased in order to promote the provision of care for children in a situation of risk or exclusion (children who live with HIV/AIDS, teenage mothers and teenage drug dependents).
- Sexual education programmes are needed.
- Student councils should be established, with the participation of children, parents and members of the community in general.
- Teenage mothers should not be deprived of their right to education.
- Education should not be based on memorizing techniques, but on our experience.
- Children should be given priority in the States' budgets.
- All forms of physical and psychological punishment in families, educational institutions and society should be prohibited.
- We adolescents are very interested in giving our support to the proposals made in this Forum, including with the groups of adolescents who come after us.
- We call upon all authorities to put a stop to border conflicts and give the education of children priority; thus generating a culture of world peace. MORE SCHOOLS, FEWER WEAPONS.

7. Achieving a consensus regarding a definition of participatory processes

At different points in this paper, as well as in the recommendations contained in the drafts shared within the framework of the Twentieth Congress and the Regional Participation Workshop held recently in Panama, we proposed that it is urgent to advance towards a consensus amongst the States with regard to an unambiguous interpretation of what we refer to when we talk about participation. This is not about choosing a definition, or producing one from someone's desk, but involves the collective construction of a concept, the identification of its dimensions and the establishment of common criteria which reflect the diversity of contexts and situations in which participation can and should be implemented.

This cannot be thought of as a task for the experts, although their contributions should also be included. Rather, we proposed a collective construction in which the children themselves should have an active role, inasmuch as it involves the exercise of their rights. The experience of operators should also be included, since they have seen the successes and difficulties involved directly, as well as the opinion of the States, since it is they that must promote the participatory inclusion of children and control the quality of the processes through the design and implementation of policies.

This definition should be flexible enough to contemplate a variety of formats, should allow for diversity and, as well as including defining features, should also include features which should be present for an experience to be considered participatory. This will make it possible to advance in the area of evaluation, through the production of a system of indicators adapted to different modalities and which can be applied by the different States and organizations.

This definition of the concept of participation as applied to children was one of the outputs expected from the 2nd Regional Workshop (Panama 2009). At that time, work was carried out with regard to the general validation of the Framework of Reference; contributions were received both from the State representatives present and through written communications from States which were not present. A consensus was achieved regarding this paper, on the understanding that the most significant comments should be included.

Discussion with regard to the definition or characterization of participation constituted one of the most productive moments of the workshop and made it possible to make significant progress in this strategically relevant issue.

The following is a summary of the collective work carried out at that time.

It was agreed that the objective was not to reach an exact definition which would encompass the whole of the possible universe of situations, but an operatively valuable characterization which would identify and define the set of elements which should be present in an experience or process for it to be possible to say that participation existed. This would not be a definition limited to description, but one containing a propositional intention. This is the participation we wish to encourage.

The starting point which enables the possibility of implementing child participation is the deconstruction of the conception of children as 'voiceless individuals' who must be protected, cared for and controlled by adults, but not heard, inasmuch as it is not acknowledged that they should have their own ideas and points of view.

All participatory processes are based on the recognition of the other person; in this case, the child, as an individual with capabilities and potential which will be different depending on the level of development he or she has attained (principle of progressive autonomy), but which are present in all human beings from the beginning of life.

In this respect, this statement issued by the children who participated in the First Pan American Forum is highly significant: "Adults must rid themselves of the notion that we children have difficulty in expressing ourselves, that we are not capable of creating productive things and that we do not have sufficient knowledge to participate." (Lima, 2009)

On such foundations, participation constitutes a right which is basically made effective as a communicative, organizational and learning process in which three moments and a set of conditions can be distinguished.

The moments are: information, opinion and listening.

- **Information** – This is in itself a right, but also a condition for participation, which in order to fulfil its purpose, should be informed. Access to information must be guaranteed in a genuine sense; that is, that it should derive not only from contact with texts, speeches or sources from which it is not possible for children to extract and assimilate the elements which will allow them to form their own judgment. It is important that accessible and easily understood material of good quality should be readily available to them. The risk that making information available to children is to reduce its quality, demean or distort it should be minimized. Information should include not only that which is related to the issues to be dealt with, but also that which is related to the background, institutional frameworks, objectives and scope of the proposals. All information should be expressed in such a manner that its assimilation on the part of children is possible.
- **Construction and recognition of their own opinion** – this refers to both individual and collective opinions. Opinions are constructed by means of the problematization of reality, reflection, discussion, exchange, synthesis and reproblematisation. They constitute an essential aspect of the processes of autonomy and citizenship-building. Recognizing and respecting opinions – with the handling of consensus and dissension this entails – is what makes collective decision-making processes dynamic. Without their own opinion, communication amongst individuals is empty of content and there can be no participation.
- **Expression and listening** – freedom of expression is not limited to ‘letting it happen’, but requires instruments, enablement and the handling of languages. For expression to be effective, listening must also take place. Respectful and receptive listening, but active in the generation of dialogue and communication. Listening does not imply the mere compilation of words spoken, but valuing and interpreting other channels of expression and communication which vary in significance amongst children, but are always relevant at the different stages of development. Listening implies a will to decode messages and take them into account when making decisions.

These moments of the process are grounded upon certain conditions without whose existence it is not possible to speak of participatory processes:

- **Participatory environments** – this means a friendly climate, of freedom and respect, in which all participants are guaranteed that the expression of their opinions will be taken into account and respected, and will not give rise to punishment or awkward situations when facing adults or peers. To make this possible it is necessary to establish clear rules which are known, understood and respected by all of the actors involved. A participatory climate is typical of an area which favours the exercise of rights and fosters dialogue. It requires instrumentation and the development of skills on the part of children, and awareness-raising on the part of adults. In addition, it is linked with organizational processes as part of the generation of such areas and mechanisms.
- **Links** – a link is the relationship between two or more persons by means of which each of the participants introduces his or her images and phantasms arising from previous experiences, which interfere in the communication process with the real individuals he or she is facing. Thus, all adults who are connecting with a child will see before them a variety of images and representations: the child they were; the child they wished to be: the prejudices triggered by the social status of their interlocutors, their own representations about being a child. At the same time, children experience the interference of other images: those arising from other experiences with adults, those of family figures, and of the adult they wish to be. This situation is strengthened and multiplied in group contexts, particularly when the members of the group are very diverse. At first, each member of the group relates to the others on the basis of his or her prejudices. In this relational field, encounters between people are limited to certain areas or gaps which open up within this phantasmagoria, and which make it possible at times to glimpse the real other person emerging from amongst the interference. Discovering others is to remove the veil of prejudice which hides them.
- **Encounters** – when each participant contacts the others and is able to do away with interference, even though not necessarily definitively, encounters take place. These encounters occur amongst peers, with children of other cultures or social status, with other genders, with adults (inter-generational encounters), with the institution or

community to which they belong, and ultimately, with themselves, rediscovering their own resources, potential and knowledge.

- **Opportunities** – all of this makes it possible to state that participatory experiences constitute an opportunity for change with regard to behaviours based on authoritarian, machista values, or values which do not respect difference and which give rise to discrimination, confrontation and exclusion. They constitute an opportunity to take up new positions, to promote new forms of inter-generational relations, as well as relations between peers and with the community and its institutions. They enable children to rediscover their place with regard to collectives which they used to perceive as foreign or even threatening.
- **Meaningful lessons learned** – learning is meaningful when it enables the restructure of the way in which a person views reality and adopts a position with regard to it. Meaningful lessons learned are not merely an accumulation of information but lead to the transformation of ways of thinking. They do not fill heads, but change them.

In addition, these moments and conditions which are necessary in order to generate a participatory process, should be interconnected with degrees of influence:

- **Consultative:** this is when ‘non-binding’ opinions are gathered for a subsequent decision-making process.
- **Collaborative:** when decisions are taken jointly between children and adults.
- **Self-generated initiative and commitment:** this refers to those infrequent situations in which children convene themselves and regulate their own participation.

To summarize:

Participation moments	Conditions for participation	Degrees of influence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Information ● Construction and recognition of their own opinion ● Expression and listening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participatory climate ● Links ● Encounters ● Opportunities ● Meaningful lessons learned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consultative ● Collaborative ● Self-generated initiative and commitment

PART II THE SITUATION OF CHILD PARTICIPATION IN AMERICAN COUNTRIES TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE ADOPTION OF THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Introduction

In compliance with the resolutions agreed at the Quito preparatory meeting, "The framework of reference should provide a special place for reflection on the effective participation practices which are taking place in the States." (Quito, 2009)

In the second part of this paper a systematization of the situation of child participation in the countries which compose the OAS system is proposed. In order to do this, we shall take as our source the 'country reports' produced and remitted by the States at the request of the IIN and in accordance with a guideline provided by the IIN.

Methodology

The information provided by the States according to the guidelines which they received has been systematized following, in general terms, a prior plan of analysis based on the items contained in the form.

It should be pointed out that this form was produced by the working group mentioned above, at the meeting which took place in Quito, in February of this year.

The characteristics of the information compiled made it necessary to reorganize some of the items, as well as include others which had not been provided for in the original plan.

The systematization constitutes an attempt to identify tendencies in the region. It does not imply an evaluation of the situations in the individual States.

Regarding the material provided by the States and its general characteristics

Thirteen country reports were received in answer to the IIN's request, between 1 June and 14 August 2009. Subsequently, the reports from Jamaica and El Salvador were also received and the information in them has been included in the final version of this document. Reporting States are distributed by geographical region, as follows:

- **Central America:** Costa Rica
El Salvador
Panamá
- **North America:** México
Canadá
- **South America:** Argentina
Brasil
Chile
Ecuador
Paraguay
Perú
Uruguay
Venezuela

- **The Caribbean:** Dominican Republic
Jamaica

Out of the total group of active OAS members, fifteen country reports were received.

Some general characteristics of the reports

Reporting States respected the form of the guidelines provided, but some of the questions were interpreted differently, which implies that the information is not clearly comparable in every case. This constituted an obstacle to quantitative analysis.

The regulatory framework is the subject for which the largest amount of information is provided and to which most importance is given, in all cases. Nonetheless, some of the information is lacking in some of the reports. Such is the case with regard to the dates of adoption of Constitutions, Codes and other legal instruments. This information would have made it possible to organize legislative output chronologically with relation to the approval of the Convention.

The States have reported on the programmes and actions which have been formalized within the framework of projects or plans, and which enjoy a certain level of institutionalization, methodical registration and continuity.

For example, Costa Rica's report states that: "There are many public and private initiatives aimed at promoting child participation; many of them appear to be temporary activities which are insufficiently documented in terms of approach, methodology and outcomes and thus cannot be included in this report."

The reports include only those experiences which are visible to the State and are duly systematized. This provides evidence of the meticulousness with which the reporting States undertook this task, but at the same time, we must acknowledge the limitations which exist when attempting an overview of child participation levels in settings which are less institutionalized but are still highly significant in a culture of rights, such as families, and non-formal community and institutional venues which children attend in their daily lives.

In some cases juvenile participation policies are included. Youth is understood to be an age group which includes persons aged between 15 and 25, and in some cases, even 35. It includes adolescents and young adults. This makes it difficult to visualize the real extent of the participation of persons below the age of 18 in these programmes.

When the States report on the principle/right to participation, they include it within policies for the comprehensive protection of rights. Although the comprehensiveness and coordination of rights is a widely-accepted concept, in some cases the specific nature of participation is blurred. Several States include amongst their activities the recognition of children as subjects of rights through administrative acts such as authorizing them to initiate legal actions, ask for protection, report situations involving ill-treatment or abuse, carry out procedures involving documentation. Although these might be considered significant steps in the recognition of children as social actors, it is arguable whether they should be included as participatory practices.

All of the reporting States express concern regarding the subject and admit to being in the midst of a process of institutional and cultural transformation with a view to removing the adult-centred conception which still prevails in wide areas of their societies. In this respect, they assert that there has been progress in recent years and that significant steps have been taken at different levels of social organization. The term 'in recent years' used in several of the reports seems ambiguous, but leads us to think that we are looking at a significantly lower period than the 20-year period since the Convention was adopted.

Most of the experiences and documents which refer to child and adolescent participation are dated within the last decade.

A general reading of the reports shows that there are groups of countries which undertake very similar initiatives, such as 'student boards', 'local councils of children', or 'children's parliamentary elections'.

The States have serious difficulty in providing clear information with regard to some of the items, such as the methodologies used, the resources allocated and the evaluation of the impact of the experiences on their protagonists.

When the methodology is included, it is limited to the description of organizational aspects without providing details regarding connections or technical tools used by the facilitators.

Only one of the countries – Ecuador – refers to the participation of children in the production of the reports.

Regulatory framework

This is one of the subjects which the States report on at greatest length. These are all States which have signed and ratified the Convention, but not all have incorporated it in the same way, or at the same level of their national legal systems.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Constitutions are the States' principal legal instruments. They establish the States' principles, organization and operation.

All of the constitutions of the reporting States include the respect and promotion of human rights amongst their doctrinal aspects. Rights such as freedom of expression, of association and of peaceful assembly are enshrined in them for the general population, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such is not the case, however, for participation or the express recognition of those rights for children.

Only some of the most recent constitutions include an express reference to the right to participation. This group of constitutions emphasizes that participation is not only a right but a need, if democracy is to operate appropriately. They refer to 'citizen control', introduce the concept of a protagonic role through participation and, in some cases, include the right of children to social participation.

According to the information received, Ecuador is the only country in the continent which acknowledges the right to vote of adolescents between 16 and 17 years of age. It should be worth reflecting upon the impact of the right to vote on the participation of teenagers.

At the same time, these constitutions, starting with the approval of Venezuela's Constitution in 1999, include the rights of the child stipulated by the Convention, granting them constitutional status.

Chile's Constitution is a special case in that although it does not include the CRC in its text, it explicitly recognizes all of the current international agreements signed by the Chilean government, awarding them constitutional status.

CODES AND LAWS ENACTED AFTER THE CONVENTION

After the Convention entered into effect in 1990, a number of Codes on childhood were approved in the continent which introduced the doctrine of comprehensive protection in the legal systems of their States. These legal instruments do not explicitly identify participation as a child's right in all of the countries, reflecting significant differences in this regard.

Other States, such as Canada, have not grouped laws which refer to the implementation of the Convention into a single regulatory body but into a set of legislative acts which refer to a variety of matters.

A significant number of States report the recent approval of laws regulating the educational system which include the participation of pupils in the management of educational centres. This seems to be a valuable indicator of the way in which the right to participation is beginning to be increasingly recognized in social venues and to cut across the legislation of the countries. This is also happening in the constitutional laws of municipalities and provinces.

A first approach to the comparative analysis of the position granted to child participation in the States' legal systems appears to require a breakdown of the subject into its elements. In the first place, the position granted to citizen participation in the States' legislation – and particularly at constitutional levels.

A second aspect, connected to the previous point, is the scope of the citizenship concept. This concept can include the following (depending on the country involved): all of the inhabitants; all nationals; all inhabitants from the moment of birth; all persons born within the national territory and who are 18 years of age or over. In other cases, citizenship is acquired gradually in an apparent reference to the principle of progressive autonomy.

A third element includes the means through which Member States have incorporated the principles of the Convention into their legislation and what place participation has been granted in their legal texts as a principle/right regarding children. Most of the reports describe the approval of post-Convention Codes in which similar language is used for most of the rights, but which display significant differences with regard to making the right to participation explicit, and to its hierarchy and institutionalization. Most of these Codes and Laws were adopted in the nineties or at the beginning of the new century.

A fourth aspect involves the levels and degrees of harmonization of these regulations with other, pre-existing, legal entities which are often in contradiction with the innovations emerging from the Convention, as well as their incorporation into new legal regulations.

A final aspect to be analyzed is the way in which the States interpret and implement these stipulations, through plans and programmes and the design and implementation of policies.

Child participation in the public policies of the States

When the States report on the principle/right to participation, they tend to include it within policies for the comprehensive protection of rights. In some cases this results in participation being considered in a very broad sense and as such, losing visibility.

An excessively wide range of actions and programmes are included in participation policies. Whilst some of the 'country reports' include under the heading of participation a group of activities for the self-affirmation of children as subjects of rights, others mention cultural, artistic, sports and recreational activities which foster integration and self-expression.

There is a third group of States which refer to levels of protagonist participation or policy in which children and their organizations are recognized as interlocutors of the State at different levels, taking an active part in decision-making processes.

In many cases children participate at national or even international levels, but neither the means of representation nor the feedback obtained from these experiences in their originating groups, is clearly described. It is not clearly apparent whether the groups participate through their representatives or whether selection and participation is at an individual level.

Other States view participation as a principle which cuts cross-sectionally across childhood policies.

Within this framework, all fifteen States report that they are developing child participation policies, and in all cases they have begun to be implemented fairly recently. They state that the subject has been propelled to the forefront in recent years.

The idea that “children’s voices should be a point of reference in decision-making, particularly in the case of decisions which directly affect their lives” is beginning to prevail in circles connected to children and is starting to penetrate cross-sections of other social areas such as local government and parliament.

Despite this level of progress, the States admit that much remains to be done. There are geographical limitations, since in most of the countries with large and heterogeneous territories policies tending to transform children’s social surroundings do not reach every corner of the land. The same is true of other countries, to a lesser extent. Human and institutional resources tend to concentrate in urban areas.

A difference is observed in the reports remitted by the States regarding the hierarchy of their legal reforms and their relation to the effective implementation of policies. Whilst some of them equate policies to drafting and approving laws, others question the restrictions these regulations imply in the transformation of cultural realities and power relations. The gap between regulation and implementation is acknowledged by a wide majority of the States.

Participation and institutionality

All fifteen reporting States have national governing or coordinating bodies for their child protection policies.

Despite differences regarding the political organization of the States, there are similarities in the designation and responsibilities of national governing bodies, but with varying degrees of decentralization and involvement of the local governments (provinces, territories, municipalities) in the design and execution of child protection policies.

One of the aspects which deserves to be carefully noted is the degree to which participatory initiatives transcend institutions specifically devoted to children and affect a cross-section of other institutions and sectors within the organization of the States.

In this respect, it is common to see the incorporation of participation in education, through student bodies, consultative councils, school municipalities, or forms of evaluation with the participation of students.

The inclusion of adolescents in the structures of local governments should be noted: in cantons, town councils or municipalities. This appears to be a qualitative leap since it transcends areas typically associated with children to approach subjects involving community operations, urban organization and inter-generational coexistence. This process exists in Argentina, Canada, Chile, Mexico, Peru and Costa Rica.

Health is another sector in which adolescent participation is increasing. Reports from Canada, Paraguay, El Salvador and Jamaica describe activities involving health promotion and prevention in issues such as smoking, adolescent suicide, violence, sexual education, HIV prevention and the encouragement of healthy habits. In El Salvador, the existence should be noted of Juvenile Circles for the strengthening of social skills, which work on the basis of cultural and artistic activities, values and the strengthening of self-esteem. Participants then reproduce the experience with other young people.

Nine of the fifteen countries report being involved in institutional transformation procedures: Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Jamaica, Paraguay and Uruguay.

The creation of specific organizations for the promotion of participation is an indication of the increasing significance this right is achieving.

Recent or on-going institutional transformations in many of the States confirm the opinion that the process of recognizing that participation is a right of children and adolescents, and the implementation of policies which are in harmony with this recognition, began to prevail approximately ten years after the approval of the Convention.

The allocation of financial resources

There is an old aphorism amongst government officials responsible for State management which says that budget allocation is the most important political act in State administration. This is what makes the difference between discourse and the genuine will to implement policies related to specific problems and proposals.

In answer to the question: Are there financial resources devoted to promoting child participation? The following answers were obtained:

- Resources have been allocated, with specific amounts, in Costa Rica, Ecuador and Peru.
- A system for the allocation of funds through projects is being implemented; no figures provided, in Argentina.
- Resources from the general budget allocated to children's issues are used; no breakdown, in Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Mexico, Brazil, Canada.
- Resources from the State's budget; no breakdown, in Panama.
- No assigned budget; international cooperation is resorted to in El Salvador
- Information not available in the remaining three reports.

The only States which report the inclusion of child participation in the distribution of budget resources are Costa Rica and Peru. The States assign resources by means of transfers to local governments and, in many cases, to NGOs.

The predominance of the lack of specific resource allocation for programmes promoting child participation amongst reporting countries is an indication of the absence of institutionality in the areas working on this issue within children's institutions.

Qualified human resources

The availability of trained human resources for the promotion of child participation is one of the conditions needed in order to develop a policy which will guarantee the quality of activities and experiences.

Some reports reflect concern regarding situations generated when the processes are initiated in the absence suitably trained personnel.

A certain degree of incongruence is also pointed to when the educational system is given the responsibility of promoting and guaranteeing rights, including participation, without the availability of teaching staff who are at least minimally trained for these duties.

Out of fifteen reports received, ten of them acknowledge the importance of the availability of human resources specifically trained in participation. Procedures are in place with a view to overcoming this difficulty but they are still incipient and have not yet reached a sufficient critical mass at national levels.

These countries are: Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay, Mexico, Canada, Panama, Peru, Dominican Republic and Uruguay. In Costa Rica, 22% of the people trained are under 18.

Five States report that they resort to NGO personnel when these organizations have experienced operators. This alliance takes place both at operative levels and in connection with training programmes. Such is the case of Paraguay, where a series of formative activities are being developed on the basis of Popular Education methodologies, with the support of experienced NGOs. Similarly, UNICEF is the international cooperation agency which is most cited with regard to training cooperation.

One of the difficulties in training public organization staff is high turnover amongst personnel devoted to these tasks. NGOs which regularly work in the area of child participation generally have well-trained adult personnel, with experience in facilitation, active participation and child protection. On the other hand, those which do not deal regularly with child participation often lack competent personnel and resources in support of such activities, which seriously affects their standard. People who have participated in these initiatives indicate that skill in working with children derives more from experience than from training. Additional training (for example, in the resolution of conflicts, or in facilitation) and specialized content (for example, workshops on the right to participation enshrined in the CRC) reinforces the level of skills.

Another line of action mentioned in a small number of reports but which appears to be relevant to cultural transformation is connected with training programmes for communicators and journalists. This is a helpful strategy to influence public opinion and foster the development of a culture of rights.

The information compiled reflects a certain level of consensus in regarding training for both protagonists and adult personnel as one of the keys to the development of successful strategies in the field of participation.

Contributions to a definition of participation

The ambiguities and indefinities which surround the concept of child participation have proved to be an obstacle when evaluating the States' fulfilment of this principle/right. In fact, the States themselves, when drafting 'country reports', have reflected this difficulty in distinguishing pertinent activities and experiences related to participation more precisely from others which are included in comprehensive protection and can generate conditions of greater inclusion and even reaffirm beneficiaries in their status as holders of rights but which cannot, strictly speaking, be considered participatory experiences.

This concern has led us to seek amongst the reports we have received, definitions and contributions which, without constituting formal definitions, enable a better characterization of the processes. It should be pointed out that the guidelines remitted to the Member States did not request such a conceptualization.

Costa Rica's report contains a definition: "Protagonist participation occurs when participation is conscious, active and creative, and has the power to influence processes affectively, respectfully and responsibly." (Paniamor Foundation 1998)

In its National Policy for the Comprehensive Development of Children (PNDINA, in Spanish), El Salvador defines the right to participation as "that which allows children to express and give their opinions in matters which affect them, to seek and impart information responsibly. In addition, it includes their right to freedom of association, to have access to timely and appropriate information, to develop their own cultural life, to profess and practice their religion and to use their own language."

For its part, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's report contributes the following to the definition of the concept of participation and other associated rights: "It should be underlined that participation can take place on two levels: as a right and as a process. Participation as a right is a civil and political right, an aim in itself. It implies a general freedom to investigate, compile and disseminate information, as well as to intervene, inform or make decisions."

"Participation as a process involves an educational, interactive, persistent task, based on motivation and on the capacity to strengthen the competencies of children. It also involves a permanent attitude of approaching children and taking their opinions into account, in each and every one of the affairs which concern them, bearing in mind that it is not necessary to do only what the children say, but to make decisions concerning them taking their views into account, and also, mainly, aiming at improving their well-being, on the principle of the best interest of the child."

"Participation operates on different spheres; administrative, judicial, family, educational, political and community, in which it is important when evaluating the opinion of children, to bear in mind area, conditions, form and the information they received and that which they submitted."

“In addition, children’s right to participation is related to the right to association and to express their opinions freely, to be heard and taken into account in all matters which concern them, to involve themselves actively in the process of making decisions related to their development, to have access to timely and appropriate information, and that their opinions be considered in the formulation of the country’s public policies (and most particularly regarding those which directly concern them), as well as in the development of activities arising from these policies and in the evaluation of their results.”

Paraguay provides no formal definition in its report but points to some conditions which give the term participation greater significance. Paraguay’s target is that children should achieve qualified and protagonist participation, as well as being political, organized and framed within political-pedagogical processes with reference to the development of the capacity for a critical analysis of reality and the conditions of everyday life.

The action plan “A Canada fit for Children”, launched in 2004, defines the participation of children as one of the eight basic principles for its successful implementation: “Children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. The active involvement of children in decision-making expands the diversity of perspectives reflected in the process, and contributes to more relevant and equitable policies and programming including more sustainable outcomes. Meaningful child participation increases children’s capacity for responsible citizenship and their respect for democratic principles.”

Who participates and where does participation take place?

Reports remitted by all fifteen States refer to over fifty experiences with very different levels of development.

In this section we shall attempt to overcome the difficulties posed by the heterogeneous nature of the information in order to identify the main tendencies regarding ages, social condition of the participants and levels of intervention, as well as environments and characteristics of the areas in which the experiences take place.

Experiences in which adolescents take part are the most numerous, followed at quite a distance by children older than ten, and in some cases, six. There is no reference in the material to any experiences involving very young children (early childhood). The question arises as to whether this is due to low visibility, to the institutional frameworks the experiences take place in (early education institutions) or to the simple fact that there have been no such experiences.

Regarding the levels of intervention, most of the experiences are universal in scope and tend to include vulnerable children (from the poorest areas, rural schools, ethnically diverse). There is also reference to projects focusing on children whose rights have been violated: child workers, victims of sexual exploitation, adolescents separated from their families, children in indigenous ethnic groups, to mention only a few examples.

Regarding the environments the experiences take place in, we mentioned at the start that the States have difficulty in describing events which occur in less institutionalized and less visible areas, such as families and communities. The experiences included in the reports refer to participation at institutional levels such as study centres and local public bodies (cantons, municipalities, provinces), in some cases at national levels, and to children’s organizations. Participation is also reported at international events and conferences.

One of the noteworthy elements in some of the experiences is the participation of children in spaces shared with adults.

In many of the experiences, the power of decision participants are endowed with is unclear. In this respect, experiences with the greatest potential are those which take place at the local government level, those which refer to urban problems, student government bodies in study centres, the inclusion of adolescents in local and national protection councils, and participatory budgeting experiences. The information available indicates that there are several experiences in which child participation is limited to spaces and forms previously determined by adults; these are cases of ‘assigned’ participation.

All of the experiences which according to the reports are to a certain extent more highly developed describe formative processes both for participants and for adults; this aspect is presented as one of the keys to success.

Experiences are generally supported through the coordination of several institutions: educational, protective, local government, health, the media; working in coordination with national and local institutions, as well as with civil society organizations.

The States acknowledge encountering difficulties in attempting to achieve a certain degree of equity in exercising the right to participation. There are difficulties in reaching the whole of the national territory. Children who live in rural areas, in particular, do not have the same opportunities as those who live in cities. This is related to the lack of qualified human resources and the fragility of the institutions. A significant shortcoming is the lack of training in the concept of rights, particularly with regard to participation, amongst teachers and personnel working with children. It is not necessary for everyone to become a specialist in the subject, but they should assimilate the 'minimum standards' required in order to recognize, accept and promote participation as an element which cuts across all activities which include children.

The experiences described by the States include some activities for the reaffirmation of rights which, although they give children the opportunity to attain a greater level of inclusion, access to information, self-esteem and other conditions which encourage participation, are not in themselves participatory experiences.

Another significant group of experiences which are replicated in several States are 'children's versions' of forms of adult participation. We refer here to children's elections, children's or young people's parliaments, and other experiences which attempt to involve children in the formal mechanisms of adults, but whose consequences in real life are different, depending on how the previous and subsequent processes – which are generally less visible – develop. The question which arises is whether these proposals stem from the participants' own interests or mainly from the concern of adults in transmitting their own forms of participation to children.

Despite the scant number of explicit definitions or concepts, the experiences make it possible to envisage different ways of perceiving child participation.

It should be noted that the reports do not include experiences which explicitly work on the gender perspective. In this sense, the term 'boys, girls' which is used in Spanish almost automatically, could be disguising gender inequities regarding access to participation.

Matters regarding which participation occurs

Article 12 of the Convention recognizes the right of children to be heard "in all matters affecting" them. This has traditionally been interpreted in a restrictive sense and tends to be understood as matters which affect children directly and individually.

General Comment N° 12 recently issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN) provides a broader, less restrictive interpretation of subjects or matters which can be the object of child participation and states that this wide interpretation "helps to include children in the social processes of their community and society". It goes on to say that: "States Parties should carefully listen to children's views wherever their perspective can enhance the quality of solutions."

The analysis of the experiences contained in the 'country reports' gives rise to a list of subjects or matters which are most frequently dealt with by children who participate in the various processes.

Before enumerating these subjects, we should stop to consider at least two matters. In the first place, the subjects listed are most constantly repeated in experiences with a universal range. Those which involve a population with violated rights show more specific interests related to their living conditions. Such is the case of child labourers or those who

have been institutionalized for different reasons.

In the second place, we cannot disregard the influence of institutions and adults with regard to the priority given to the different subjects; as we have already noted, some of the experiences provide evidence of a significant level of adult control with regard to the subjects addressed.

The subjects contained in the reports coincide with those which arise from the analysis of declarations and papers produced at forums and meetings recently held. Amongst the many different topics listed, the following stand out:

- Family relations, parent-child dialogue, ways of resolving discrepancies. The insufficient capacity of adults to respect other viewpoints and bear them in mind is deplored, as is their tendency to impose rather than promote and stimulate. "There is a fear of talking when there are discrepancies." In this respect, they demand the intervention of the State through plans and programmes to promote changes in parents' attitudes.
- The violence which is apparent in families, educational institutions and society. Corporal punishment is a common practice on the part of adults. Violence also includes sexual abuse and is more visible when aimed at girls or female teenagers, but a double discrimination exists when the victims are boys. Children are not trained to confront such situations, adults do not speak of them and the victims are viewed as 'difficult'.
- Discrimination against disabled persons, cultural minorities or individuals in special situations such as pregnant teenagers.
- There is a very marked interest in experiences in urban settings close to their dwellings. Road safety, the care and maintenance of public areas, the existence of meeting and recreational venues for different ages, secure conditions so that children can attend such places without being dependent on adults.
- The environment and its pollution by factories, mining concerns and oil companies, which destroys natural resources and are a danger to health.
- The quality of education is brought into question, as well as the lack of technology to make activities more entertaining, and access difficulties, particularly for children who live in rural areas. They demand good quality and a friendly educational system, with an absence of discrimination and with the participation of children in the determination of content, as well as in the evaluation of teachers.
- With regard to health issues, there is concern about sexual and reproductive health, the prevention of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, discriminatory treatment experienced in health-care services by children in general and when they belong to indigenous cultures in particular. In some cases, adolescents participate actively as 'promoters of health' or of 'healthy habits'.
- Participation through the establishment of consultative settings which can advise governments on public policy, the distribution of resources, the definition and evaluation of social plans and programmes.

Regarding the evaluation of impact

The reports received confirm the difficulties encountered by the States in the systematization of experiences and in particular with regard to their follow-up and evaluation. Most of them do not refer to any systematic evaluation.

Answers regarding impact are organized more on the basis of personal impressions and seemingly qualitative rather than quantitative evidence. In this respect, there are similarities with regard to indicators of the impact of the experiences which include such aspects as:

- The experience of exercising the right to give an opinion strengthens participants
- They feel competent to participate in matters regarding the community
- They feel that they were taken into account
- They express themselves more freely
- They broaden their networks of contacts
- They socialize their own experiences
- They discover new ways of communicating
- They discover that they have rights

- They improve their social cognitive performance
- Their emotional and intellectual development is stimulated
- Participants tend to involve themselves in other projects
- They have access to a greater amount of information
- Family ties are modified
- They gain more tools with which to produce their life projects
- Contact with the authorities positions them as people with rights
- They acquire a critical vision of their reality
- They learn how to organize themselves and work in groups
- Many of them subsequently lead other initiatives
- Sometimes, children's organizations tend to consolidate and form networks which broaden their scope of action

However, there is no lack of negative effects which give evidence of the risks encountered when participation is not handled appropriately:

- If participants are not well-informed of the scope of the experiences, disappointment results.
- Adult personnel who come into contact with them should adopt an attitude of respect.
- Trust is an asset which should be nurtured.
- The children should feel that the experience is 'serious' and that everyone handles it responsibly.
- Representation procedures should be carefully watched.
- Submissive relations transferred from the environment can be reproduced.
- Care should be taken not to make children responsible for the solution of problems which adults do not confront.

Regarding whether child participants had the opportunity to express their opinions and points of view on the experiences, all the States answered affirmatively, but no description was given of these opinions. There are only a few references to pleasing aspects of the experiences which the participants recall. This leads to a reflection on the contradiction implied by the fact that when the participation experience is evaluated, the participating children's opinions do not seem to matter.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A general overview of the countries in the region, twenty years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, shows evidence of significant progress, both with regard to the recognition by the States of the right to child participation, and in the consideration of the principle of participation as a focal point which cuts cross-sectionally across policies for the protection of children.

This is reflected in a variety of experiences which have been implemented in recent years as well as in the process of institutional transformation and training of qualified human resources promoted by the governments.

It should be noted that the information compiled makes it possible to state that these activities have taken place recently; more specifically, after the beginning of this century and not immediately after the approval of the Convention and its ratification by Member States.

A general overview of the countries in the region, 20 years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, provides evidence of significant progress, both with regard to the recognition by the States of the right to child participation, and in the consideration of the principle of participation as a focal point which cuts cross-sectionally across policies for the protection of children.

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It should be noted that the information compiled makes it possible to state that these activities have taken place recently; more specifically, after the beginning of this century and not immediately after the approval of the Convention and its ratification by Member States.

The gap between regulation and implementation is acknowledged by a broad majority of the States. This observation leads to a question regarding the risk of over-regulating participation in terms of legal precepts divorced from real life. There is a risk of reducing the right to participation to an event during legal and administrative proceedings; a right included in legal texts but which is not exercised in daily life.

These advances recorded by the States are heterogeneous with regard to coverage, nature of participation, environments, degrees of influence in decision-making and the consolidation of experiences. At the same time, they coexist with a still strongly adult-centred conception which is prevalent in broad sectors of our societies and even amongst planners and operators in the field of childhood.

This is related to a certain tendency in on-going experiences to restrict themselves to institutional spaces reserved for children, since they encounter greater resistance when they attempt to penetrate inter-generational spaces.

With regard to the impact of experiences on participants, although there is evidence of the heterogeneity mentioned above, the reports agree in underlining the achievement amongst participants of self-awareness as subjects of rights, the learning of skills in negotiating with adults, the expansion of social networks and the acquisition of organizational and team-work tools. In this respect, the concept of participation as a 'facilitating right' which makes it possible to achieve other aims is confirmed. (Crowley P. 1998)

With regard to the conceptual and methodological knowledge accumulated so far, some weaknesses have been made evident. The literature abounds in references to the Convention, quotations from legal texts and the foundations of principles which legitimize the right to participation of children. However, there are gaps with regard to:

- The availability of a definition which would make it possible to agree upon what is and what is not participation. So long as such agreement had not been achieved, the stipulation of this right in regulatory frameworks would not have been enough to guarantee its implementation as it left its interpretation to the discretion of adults. In this respect, the characterization arrived at by consensus on the basis of the work carried out by the IIN constitutes

a significant step and provides the States with foundations for the implementation of policies based on regionally shared criteria.

- This is a necessary condition for the production of evaluation and monitoring systems which among other things make it possible to analyze the level of fulfilment on the part of the States regarding the mandates of the Convention. It is not possible to measure the existence of something which is not clearly defined.
- The papers and reports received do not give an account of the methodologies which were used.

They describe organizational steps, institutional procedures and public events which took place during the process. However, they say little or nothing about the link with participating children, the agreements which were negotiated with them, the inclusion or not of their parents or other focus adults, conflicts emerging during the experiences, the ways in which these conflicts were addressed and any elements at stake in the relations amongst the participants and between the participants and the facilitating adults, all of which is not visible outside the venue of the encounter but which supports the experience.

One possible explanation is that while some aspects of the experience reach the authorities who draft the country reports, those more closely connected with the 'face-to-face' experience during the process, remain in the memory of the operators, which makes it difficult to achieve their systematization and socialization.

All of the States share concern regarding the training of personnel to work in the child participation programmes. Several training programmes have been set up, despite which the critical mass is still insufficient to cover the territories and the diversity of institutions it is hoped to work with. This shortcoming is most evident in rural areas.

In addition, there is a contradiction between the position afforded to educational institutions with regard to policies on children, and the absence of generalized training for teachers on the perspective of rights in general and participation in particular.

By way of a summary, it is possible to say that the current situation of OAS Member States regarding child participation brings us face-to-face with, on the one hand, an opportunity, and on the other, a risk.

The opportunity arises from the interest shown by the reporting States, the accumulation of on-going experiences, and the involvement of children themselves; of which the mandate for the production of this study is a clear indicator.

The risk, involving as it does the emergence of participation together with a lack of a clear definition and the resistance originating in adult-centred tradition, could lead to a distortion of the concept. A proliferation of manipulative or decorative modalities could emerge which would constitute an apparent 'participatory fashion' and hinder the genuine implementation of an inalienable right.

These observations lead to the formulation of the following recommendations:

- 1.** The first consists in appreciating the value of accumulated experience and the interest shown by the States, viewing what has been done as a starting point for in-depth theoretical research, practice and policy regarding the right to participation and its links with the lives of children in the continent. In this respect, we refer again to the mandate of the Quito working group with regard to the production of this framework of reference: "to compile documents already produced, include children's opinions, bear in mind existing experiences and the lessons they provide". It is necessary to extract methodological lessons and tools from the experiences, which will lead to improving the quality of the interventions and protect participants from weakening or non-motivating situations. In addition, to share techniques and instruments used to resolve situations arising during the processes.
- 2.** Most of the States have identified the need to train personnel in participatory work. It seems appropriate to think of ways to advance towards some minimum protocols for this training which will enable the exchange of experiences, give rise to shared materials and produce methodologies for the training processes on the basis of a

reflexive analysis of practices. This training must gradually extend to the entire group of personnel working with children and not be limited only to 'participation specialists'. The aim should be that all people working with children should assimilate the 'minimum standards' which will allow them to respect, promote and incorporate participation, as well as all of the rights enshrined in the CRC, in their habitual dealings with children.

3. It is necessary to make further progress with regard to methodologies and instruments for evaluation and the construction of indicators, as well as in producing regional agreements which will guarantee the quality of the processes. The way in which the opinions of the participants themselves are included and taken into account should be a central point of these means of evaluation.

4. Inasmuch as participation requires the respect and validation of the adult world, awareness-raising activities should be carried out, as well as the promotion of childhood as a stage during which persons have the potential to be social actors. A strategic population in this aspect is composed of social communicators and journalists.

5. In view of the significance of the family context in connection with this right, we should like to espouse the recommendation made by the children who participated in the First Pan American Forum with regard to "promoting participation and mutual respect within the family, through raising the awareness of adults so that they may respect children's opinions" (Lima, 2009). This makes it necessary to implement programmes and specific actions in order to promote attitude changes and enable parents and adults responsible for children to resolve conflicts peacefully.

6. We should not allow enthusiasm and wishful thinking to cause us to neglect the quality of participatory processes. As the children who participated in the First Pan American Forum stated, participation must be "meaningful, active and inclusive". With regard to this, emphasis was laid on the principle of non-discrimination, with particular reference to the ages between 0 and 5, and to children with special skills and needs.

7. The diversification of participation areas should be promoted. It should be included in institutions which work with children, but efforts must also be made so that it spills over into inter-generational contexts. In this respect, we should like to repeat the words of the First Forum: "Adults must rid themselves of the notion that we children have difficulty in expressing ourselves, that we are not capable of creating productive things and that we do not have sufficient knowledge to participate" (Lima, 2009). Only by overcoming such adult-centred postures shall we be able to advance towards the construction of a culture of integration and dialogue in diversity.

8. In keeping with the significant nature of participation, it is essential to promote wide interpretation with regard to issues which concern children. To overcome the tendency to determine these concerns from the point of view of adults, in order to listen to the interests of the participants themselves and to produce the agendas to be worked with through dialogue. In this respect, the strength with which issues connected with education, health, the environment, family relations and discriminatory behaviour are dealt with in forums and meetings is very significant. Children have proved to have relevant opinions with regard to these issues, based on their own experience.

9. The broadest possible dissemination and follow-up of the declarations, papers and contributions made by children in meetings and other events should be fostered. This will not only reaffirm their social role, but also give evidence of their potential when adults are willing to respect and listen to them.

It should be noted that the work plan for 2010 which the IIN submitted to the consideration of the States is fully in harmony with these recommendations. In this plan, on the basis of the availability of an agreed framework of reference, it is proposed to construct a child participation model for the Americas. This entails the production of three outputs:

- a. A guide for the design of public policies on child participation for officials with political powers of decision.
- b. A training course for trainers on child participation.
- c. A toolkit for operatives.

As mentioned in the introduction, the proposal/mandate of producing this framework of reference arose from the 1st Regional Participation Workshop held in Quito in February 2009, and it was drafted during the second half of the same year. During this time, events took place, progress was made and significant proposals were institutionalized in order to move forward in the recognition and exercise of participation. Events within the OAS system, such as the Twentieth Congress, the 1st Child Forum and the 2nd Regional Workshop constituted a sounding board and at the same time strengthened events and processes within the States as well as in other international contexts. Such was the case in the drafting of the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment N° 12, the resolutions taken by the governments of Peru and Uruguay for the establishment of consultative councils – which were added to the council already existing in Ecuador – the progress made towards the achievement of consensus with regard to this very paper, and the collective production of the definition of participation, as well as the progress made with regard to the 2010 Action Plan on the part of the General Directorate of the IIN.

The dynamism which surrounded the participation of children in the Americas during 2009 gave rise to the need to redraft several of the chapters of this paper several times, in order to include new contributions and give a true account of changing realities. The recommendations contained in the first versions lost currency as they were adopted by the States and specialized organizations.

Notwithstanding the difficulties implied by drafting a paper which needed to reflect a reality in a constant state of flux, this provides evidence of the fruitfulness and the inclusive tendency of the historic moment the continent is living with regard to the consolidation of the rights-based approach, the reinforcement of democracy and the strengthening of its citizens, beyond all differences.

At the conclusion of this paper, we shall again use the words of the participants who attended the First Pan American Forum:

“And let us not forget that as children, we have a right to play, rest, express ourselves, give our opinions and be heard. In short: to participate as the individuals we are in the society of which we are part.” (Lima, 2009)

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APPENDIX 1

THINKING ABOUT PARTICIPATION BY PARTICIPATING

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE 1ST CHILD FORUM

The First Pan American Child Forum was celebrated in September 2009, in Lima (Peru), within the framework of the Twentieth Pan American Child Congress.

An official children's forum was held for the first time in the history of the region, through the intermediation of the Inter-American Children's Institute (IIN) and with the cooperation of a significant number of institutions, within the setting of a specialized OAS Conference.

Its general objective was:

- To promote the participation of children through the celebration of an official event in which they could exercise their right to express an opinion and be heard by the authorities responsible for the design and implementation of public policy for children in the region.

Its specific objectives were:

- To guarantee that suitably equipped spaces existed in order to facilitate participation between children and generations within the framework of all of the activities planned for the Twentieth Pan American Child Congress.
- To gather the opinion of children regarding progress, obstacles, outlook and recommendations, twenty years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- To gather opinions and recommendations regarding the exercise of the right to participation in our region.
- To enable the conclusions of the First Pan American Forum to be considered within the framework for the discussion of the Resolutions of the Twentieth Pan American Congress.

The inclusion of a brief summary of the systematization of this experience as an appendix to the framework of reference is based on two aspects:

- **The historical and political relevance of the event.** The Pan American Congresses have been celebrated since 1916 as opportunities for dialogue, reflection and communication. They constitute political and technical events whose purpose is to verify the levels achieved by American countries with regard to children's policies, and to identify progress and challenges still pending. These Congresses are formally endorsed by the countries and are attended by senior teams of officials, such as ministers, secretaries of state and other authorities responsible for the issues to be dealt with.

In this respect, the First Pan American Child Forum was a completely new experience and was particularly significant as it was the first opportunity in which the participation of children was encouraged, as were their conversations with representatives at the highest political level and their influence in the final conclusions of the Twentieth Congress.

- **The event's methodological lessons.** The generation of a participatory setting within the context of an organization with characteristics such as ours entailed a methodological and organizational effort which provided valuable lessons to be borne in mind in future events of this nature. The achievement of participation required the wide application of imagination, capacity for dialogue and flexibility. A careful process was set in motion in order to ensure that it was the children themselves who spoke, defined and prioritized their experiences with regard to the exercise of their rights. Nevertheless, the participants have noted certain deficiencies and have pointed out certain aspects which could be improved in future events.

In order to reconstruct the experience we have focused on methodological and political issues, since the content and conceptual contributions have already been included within the body of the paper ³.

³ In order to effect this reconstruction we shall base ourselves on the systematization carried out by the members of the team of consultants, Maribel Saldaña and Alfonso Gutiérrez, and the report by consultant Luis Albernaz (Dec. 2009).

Approaches promoted

- The rights perspective based on the CRC.
- The gender and inter-generational approach. An analysis of child participation on the basis of power systems, based on gender and generational differences.
- The lessons-learned approach, with regard to the processes that generate meaningful lessons learned based on children's experiences and feelings.

Methodological processes promoted

The proposed methodology enables the identification of three significant processes:

The first was based on the children's experience, knowledge and feelings, encouraging a reflexive attitude which initially covered the most general and broadest of issues (for example: problems experienced in the countries; the situation regarding rights, etc.), and then began to focus on individual and/or collective experiences (types of participation, participation contexts, meaning of representation).

A second process is related to the production of new knowledge. This implied the assimilation of information and the promotion of the opportunity to be heard, to listen and to take their companions as a point of reference. Subjects such as participation by age and setting, and the role of the guarantors of rights were addressed.

Both processes led to a third moment which could be referred to as 'impact'. Making specific contributions, the children proposed, recommended, questioned and demanded (central elements in impact-producing processes) in order to improve the exercise of their rights.

The consultants support the opinions of some of the adolescents regarding the need to include a greater variety of facilitating communication and production techniques.

"In a scenario which involves working with children and adolescents, it is worthwhile reconsidering the techniques to be used. Making use of and acknowledging the different forms of expression used by children, the use of technology, music and audiovisual dynamics could be helpful in such an endeavour." (Saldaña and Gutiérrez, 2009)

"A greater variety of attractive activities could have been used, in which we ourselves participated; for example, theatrical presentations to illustrate the ill-treatment of children – a situation in which we are beaten – something which draws our attention. Someone could sing, perhaps a song about rights, which we ourselves could compose; perhaps a poem... you know that young people love to have something which attracts their attention, something interesting, and to do things themselves" (girl, 16 years old).

THE FORUM AS A PROCESS

One of the most meaningful lessons learned is that which involves the need to think about this type of activities not as events which begin and end in a shared time and space, but as processes with preceding and subsequent stages on which the quality of participation and its impact depend to a large extent.

For the objectives to be genuinely achievable, rigorous work must be carried out, "pre-forum, during the forum and post-forum" (Albernaz, L., 2009).

THE PRECEDING PROCESS: INVITATION, SELECTION AND PREPARATION OF PARTICIPANTS

The IIN made the call for participation and left the dissemination of the event and the selection criteria to the discretion of the States.

Two broad forms of invitation/selection can be distinguished amongst the variety of existing formats.

One was specific or personalized; children who were acknowledged leaders within programmes promoted both by the States and by NGOs were invited to participate. In some cases they were interviewed, but for the most part, in this style of selection participants were appointed directly, without a selection process and without the participation of their peers. This was noted by the participants themselves and experienced as a fact which impoverished the experience: "I would have liked a greater degree of participation... that way you can be a better representative" (boy, 16).

Another form involved broad and collective calls for participation with selection processes on the basis of pre-established criteria. They included competitions or voting processes, either on the basis of previously agreed criteria, or left to the discretion of each child. The participants selected in this way felt stronger in their participation and reaffirmed in their leadership.

Nevertheless, the participation allowed to children during the invitation and selection was extremely restricted. Although this was the responsibility of the States, they did not implement strategies for children to adopt active roles in selecting their peers.

In this respect, Canada's contribution is very significant:

"Accumulated experience has shown that effective practices are those which allow children to participate during the whole process of the initiative; that is, when children participate in the launching of the project and they are consulted with regard to guidance, decision-making, policy design, budget management and its implementation and evaluation. It has also been shown that greater coordination amongst organizations working on child participation initiatives leads to a more unified and complementary approach" (contribution from Canada, 2009).

The authors of the forum systematization agree:

"We wish to stress the need to have more clearly defined criteria which will contribute to, or support member countries in the promotion of child participation, particularly in vitally important stages such as those involving calls for participation and selection for events of this nature" (Saldaña and Gutiérrez, 2009).

With regard to the profile of the participants, all of them had experience in leadership, high expectations in connection with the forum, were able to handle information on the issues to be addressed and firm views regarding these issues, including proposals and recommendations to submit to the authorities.

Sixty-one delegates attended (thirty-two girls and twenty-one boys), from: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador El Salvador, Jamaica, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, United States, Uruguay and Venezuela. Their ages ranged from 10 to 19 years of age, with a predominance of teenagers.

The absence of younger children confirms the difficulties in including school-age children and very young children in participatory events, which has already been pointed out elsewhere in this paper.

Most countries supported training processes and informative meetings with regard to the central issues to be addressed during the forum.

Some of the countries initiated the training stages and provided information from the moment of the call for participation, thus giving rise to participatory processes with the exchange of experiences and the production of collective knowledge over a longer period.

Preparation became a strategy which included all of the children invited, not only the ones ultimately selected. In this respect, the children selected were strengthened at the end of these learning processes which constituted a good move as they encouraged collective participation and provided feedback for all the participants.

Other countries worked with specific documents which contained the contributions of children. During the preparation process, some of the chosen children felt that it was necessary to share the information with their peers and on their own initiative promoted meetings in order to share opinions and discuss the various subjects. In other countries it was part of the strategy to plan for weekly or monthly meetings so that the children could work together on the production of the papers to be submitted.

Some of the adolescents indicated that there had been no preparation at all in their countries and that they were not even aware of the issues which were to be addressed during the forum.

The IIN includes this point in his report amongst the lessons learned from the forum and proposes the following for inclusion amongst prior activities: "To make progress in drafting documents which will make it possible to work with the teenagers in their own countries on the issues which will subsequently be debated during the event." He also stresses that during the preparatory stage, "the workshop with the facilitators should be granted more time in order to enable the assimilation of methodology, the discussion of role and function, etc."

PARTICIPATION DURING THE FORUM

During the forum different areas were made available (workshops, creative opportunities, mini-Congress or Congreso-Ilo) in which the children were able to make themselves heard with their own voices, and not only be heard, but also impact events with their opinions. In this respect, two dynamics were used which tended to reaffirm their 'power of speech': self-recognition and recognition both by adults and by peers.

Aspects to be highlighted arising from this experience:

- **Decision-making.** It was the children themselves who prioritized problems, built agreements, decided how to include them in documents, defined criteria and chose their representatives. Many of the decisions were shared with adults, which made it possible for those who generally monopolize decision-making to learn and engage in self-criticism.
- **Representation.** Each group elected its representatives by a show of hands. Thus a drafting committee was formed which in turn elected its spokespeople – in every case, a boy and a girl – and avoiding the reiteration of people at different events. At the same time, each country chose its spokesperson to communicate with the media (TV, radio, written press). One aspect which those of us who observed the development of these events wish to highlight is the responsibility with which adolescents took on the role of representing a collective group and understood that they were not present merely through their own personal inspiration.
- **Self-organization.** In many of the events it was the children themselves who coordinated, led and facilitated group work, taking on the responsibility of ensuring that the task proposed was carried out.

Participation adopted different forms depending on the type of work:

- **Workshops and plenary sessions.** This was one of the most potent aspects of the methodology used. The workshops made it possible to gather the experience and knowledge of the participants, as well as the collective work arising from them and facilitated participation at the forum and the Congress. These devices became genuine areas for the expression of children's interests and experiences, self-acknowledging and acknowledging their value and broadening understanding of the diversity which characterizes the continent. At the same time, these processes were strengthened during the plenary sessions, in which group work was shared and collective levels were recovered, over and above the more reduced workshop groups. It should be noted as a limitation, however, that the time available in many cases was not enough to take advantage of the wealth of experiences available.
- **The practice of consensus.** The variety of knowledge and experiences brought participants face-to-face with the challenge of building consensus, an aspect which they highlighted as one of the most rewarding of the whole event. They brought their capacity to think in terms of the collective group into play and adopted debate as the path towards building consensus on the basis of their differences.
- **Dialogue, interlocution and the legitimacy of others.** Collective creation based on their own voices is in itself a transforming challenge which demands essentially that these voices be legitimized by the very members of the community. Undertaking this type of participation has enabled legitimacy to be constructed on the basis of the fact that the children recognized their peers as valid interlocutors, whatever their status and social condition. This is how a 16-year-old expressed it: "I am surprised because participants have come with many different experiences... some of the problems are the same, but they are experienced in different ways... I realize I have a lot to learn from the children and adolescents who come from other places."
- **Drafting documents for the Congress.** This was a crucial aspect of the strengthening process. It implied the systematization of what each group worked upon, the election of representatives, discussions amongst themselves in order to agree on how to draft the document and the election of spokespeople at the plenary session. The experience of seeing their words reflected in the papers presented by their spokespeople was extremely meaningful for the participants; it strengthened their actions and made it possible to experiment with having an impact.

GAME AND RECREATIONAL PROPOSAL FOR PARTICIPATION

There were game/recreational events which enabled children to express themselves freely through artistic techniques. The idea was to plan events which allowed participants a greater degree of autonomy and freedom, so that they could relax and amuse themselves in between intensive work periods in the workshops.

- **"We express and inform ourselves" (audiovisual activity):** The children themselves interviewed other participants about their experience at the forum, their opinion regarding the activities and the subjects addressed each day. They carried out the interviews, recorded and filmed them and performed the technical work.
- **"Our view constructs the future" (photography activity):** Participants photographed themselves and their companions during the activities in which they took part at the forum. The final product was the presentation of a mural on which the outline of a child was drawn using all of the photographs.
- **"When a spray can expresses our ideas" (graffiti activity):** Participants drew and wrote on a large piece of cloth, on subjects related to their experiences.
- **"Our bodies express themselves and build" (self-expression activity):** This activity encouraged development, relaxing and interaction between the children through body movements.

On the whole, the creative events were criticized by the participants with regard to two aspects: the lack of a connection between the game proposals and productions and the subjects addressed in the workshop, and the unfulfilled expectation of communicating with people outside the forum: people in the street, society, other children.

In this respect, at forthcoming events it would be interesting to promote creative activities with a direct connection to issues arising from workshops and plenaries, giving pride of place to the issues which most draw the attention of participants, or to new and less visible problems.

THE CONGRESILLO (MINI-CONGRESS) EXPERIENCE

The Congresillo was celebrated at the end of the forum. The proposal consisted in each country choosing its representative in order to discuss the final agreements with regard to the issues addressed during the forum, which were then presented at the Twentieth Congress.

In this respect, the Congresillo allowed the children to review the documents in order to resubmit their arguments, discuss them and reach agreements on a variety of approaches and concepts. The children organized themselves and chose a moderator and a rapporteur. In addition, they determined that whoever wished to give an opinion should ask the moderator to be allowed to speak.

The event provided the necessary conditions so that the children were the absolute protagonists in the drafting of the documents. Adults participated as observers or making notes of the main ideas.

The children as well as the adults were in full agreement that this was one of the forum's most fruitful methodological strategies. It constituted an effective democratic exercise, inasmuch as the children established a respectful exchange of views, strengthening and reaffirming the fact that one of the essential aspects which makes participation possible is the encouragement of the validation of their voices and opinions.

Long discussions were entered into which responded above all to the complexity of the problem addressed and to the effort to achieve consensus and agree upon conclusions in a participatory manner.

The children refer to the Congresillo as one of the events they enjoyed the most, since it definitely fulfilled their expectations regarding participation, leadership and autonomy.

"I liked it very much, it's what I liked best, everything should have been that way... perhaps the work groups could have been like that; we facilitated, we wrote everything ourselves and we reached agreements..." (boy, 17).

"We ourselves arrived at conclusions and agreements" (girl, 16).

The Congresillo and the way it was self-regulated would not have been possible if the processes of interlocution, collective work and representative validation had not been encouraged beforehand during the workshops and plenary sessions.

INTER-GENERATIONAL MEETING OPPORTUNITIES

Some of these opportunities took place during the forum and others during the Congress. They constituted an important part of the experience inasmuch as they put adults' capacity for interlocution to the test and made it possible to see the effects of the forms of operation typical of events organized by and for adults on the participation of children.

- **Inter-generational dialogue** with Ms Landon Pearson (Canadian former Senator). After a brief presentation the opportunity was provided to ask questions in writing. Over fifty questions were asked, many of which it was not possible to answer due to a lack of time.
- **Dialogue panels** organized within the framework of the Twentieth Congress. They addressed the three thematic focal points (participation, public policies and international cooperation). They were based on the presentation of experiences on the part of the States, with the mandate to draft recommendations to be submitted to the Congress. The children participated as observers, with exception of the participation focal point, during which they gave their views together with the representatives of their States.

During the evaluation, the adolescents stated that they did not feel that this event facilitated participation (excessive formality, technical language, a form of presentation which generated insecurity).

- **Congress.** The children participated in different ways: as observers during the conferences, and as presenters, contributing what was produced at the workshops and plenary sessions. These presentations were carried out through representatives. The children questioned the formality of these events and expressed their disappointment inasmuch as they would have liked to experience a greater degree of dialogue and exchange.

The participants' opinions indicate the need to rethink the participation strategies for children within the framework of Congresses, to propose alternative specific meeting areas appropriate for discussion and exchanges with officials.

These observations in no way minimize the historical and political significance of the participation of children during the Twentieth Congress. It not only constitutes the first time that this participation is promoted, but it has been validated and steps have been taken to include it as a permanent event in a formal organization with an 83-year-old history. This responds to processes in which child and juvenile actions have been gaining ground and influence in the countries of the region, and have been placing on the public agenda a series of demands which question the role of adults and their institutions with regard to guaranteeing rights.

Amongst the expectations concerning children arising from the Congress is the need to provide follow-up for the agreements, as well as to provide controls so that the recommendations and proposals submitted are borne in mind in the public policies of the countries of the region. The participants proposed a series of strategies related to the creation of regional follow-up and supervision actions for the agreements.

In this respect, the immediate reception by the States of Peru and Uruguay of the recommendation to create consultative councils in which children can express their opinions and points of view on public policies to the authorities can be taken as a positive signal. It should be noted that Ecuador had already set up a similar council. For its part, the Congress itself in its resolution proposed that Member States should institutionalize the forum so that it may form part of forthcoming Congresses.

These advances with regard to institutionalization, as well as the lessons derived from the forum with regard to methodological matters, may be viewed, rather than as an arrival at a 20-year point after the Convention, as a starting point for a series of processes which should be promoted in terms of the political participation of children.

CHILD PARTICIPATION IN THE AMERICAS



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