Strategies for discussing and managing power dynamics in intergenerational groups

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Introduction

Civil associations are critical to the successful functioning of democracies. Civil associations provide the 'networks of civic engagement' within which reciprocity is learned and enforced, trust is generated, and communication and patterns of collective action are facilitated (Putnam, 1995). However, some individuals experience greater challenges to engage in civil and political activities, to freely express their views, and to contribute to decision-making on matters that affect them.

The question of whether or not certain people have the capacity to take part in different levels of governance has been debated since the birth of democracy. Although the range of people taking part in democratic processes has widened, children are still denied opportunities. An obvious example includes age limits on voting, which is a minimum of 18 years of age in a majority of countries, and 16 years of age in a small minority.[1]

Global recognition of children's right to form associations is of fairly recent origin with the nearly universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; UN General Assembly, 1989). Since its adoption in 1989, it has been ratified by all members of the United Nations except the United State of America, making it the most widely and rapidly ratified international human rights treaty in history. The UNCRC is a legally binding instrument setting out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children. It is a global tool created to ensure that children are protected and can freely

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[1] In Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey and Nicaragua, the voting age is 16. See http://chartsbin.com/view/re6

voice their concerns (Alaimo and Klug, 2002). And it has brought 'a qualitative transformation of the status of children as the holders of rights' (Alston and Tobin, 2005).

The UNCRC brings attention not only to children's nurturance rights, but also to their participation rights. For instance, Article 15 of the Convention states: *State parties recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.* Presumably, children exercise this and other participation rights, such as freedom of thought or religion, in ways appropriate with their age (Helwig, 2006) and evolving capacities (Lansdown, 2005). Working children's unions and child rights' clubs around the world are excellent examples of groups of children who come together to address mutual challenges that they face (Kimiagar and Hart, 2016). These children's associations represent part of a larger spectrum of settings where children come together to address their needs, some with greater and lesser degrees of adult involvement and power sharing (Kimiagar, 2016).

Although some children's associations operate autonomously from the influence of adults, many include partnerships with adults and are, in fact, intergenerational. These inter-generational associations have complex power dynamics because the challenges of creating equity across age groups intersect with other aspects of social power, such as gender norms and class/caste dynamics. In some instances, adult power holders may even hinder, rather than foster, younger group members' meaningful participation through opaque decision-making processes. For example, adults might have fiduciary responsibilities that young people are legally barred from having, therefore, adults will need to fulfil the challenging role of negotiating how to inform and involve young people in appropriate ways.

Below, we highlight some tools and strategies intergenerational groups may use to critically evaluate their participatory qualities. We draw examples from our experiences conducting workshops with intergenerational participants using activities from the Article 15 Resource Kit (crc15.org/kit).

Article 15 Resource Kit

The tools in the Article 15 Resource Kit were co-developed by members of child and youth associations around the world alongside researchers and practitioners from the Article 15 Project, a global partnership between members of Save the Children, World Vision, UNICEF, and the Children's Environments Research Group, which was the coordinating partner. The purpose of the Article 15 Project is three fold: (1) raising awareness about Article 15 of the UNCRC; (2) developing tools for the establishment, management, and sustainability of child-managed groups; and (3) supporting children and adults to work in partnership by designing a process that strengthens their understanding and respect for one another.

The Resource Kit is made up of over 20 activities organised into 11 modules. The activities are highly visual and tactile, and embody methods to generate data about group

functioning. Some incorporate drama and movement, and others are adaptations of well-known methods, such as body mapping (Hart, Rajbhandary, and Khatiwada, 2001; Feinstein and O'Kane, 2005; O'Kane and Feinstein, 2008). Below we provide an overview of three activities we recommend as an entry point for groups to discuss power dynamics: the *Good Group/Bad Group Drama*, the *Organizational Diagram*, and the *Decision-making Chart*. These sketches provide only an overview of each tool. Step-by-step instructions are available in the modules of the resource kit.

Good/Group Bad Group Drama (Module 3, Tool 3)

Theatre allows group members to express feelings and ideas that are sometimes difficult to explain during group discussions. The *Good Group/Bad Group Drama* activity invites participants to think and act creatively about what it means to organise a group in ways that are effective, inclusive, and fair, as well as ways that are not. Group members divide into two or more smaller groups. At least one small group performs a brief skit about how a 'good group' manages itself. Another small group creates a brief skit about a group that does not manage itself well, a 'bad group.' Each group performs their skit for each other, and there is a collective discussion among all the participants after each performance about what made the group in the skit either a 'good group' or a 'bad group.' We recommend recording the key messages from this discussion on one or more sheets of flipchart paper and displaying each (for the remainder of the workshop or indefinitely) for all group members to see and reflect on.

The Organisational Diagram (Module 6, Tool 10)

In the Organisational Diagram activity, participants think about the structure of their organisation in terms of group roles and how members of their group communicate. Participants use small pieces of coloured construction paper with printed silhouettes of gender normative feminine and masculine figures (see Figure 1). There are four feminine figures and four masculine figures representing different generational categories: child, adolescent, youth, and adult. There are no specific ages associated with these four categories, but participants typically use the following ranges: 12 years and younger for children, 13 to 17 years of age for adolescents, 18 to 25 years of age for youth, and 26 years and older for adult women and men. The silhouette figures are printed on brightly coloured paper so that the age and gender differences may be seen a few feet away. The activity invites participants to arrange the figures in a way that represents how the group organises itself and to draw lines with arrows that represent relationships between members, such as who coordinates with one another, who provides instruction for tasks, or who is responsible for group finances (see Figure 2).
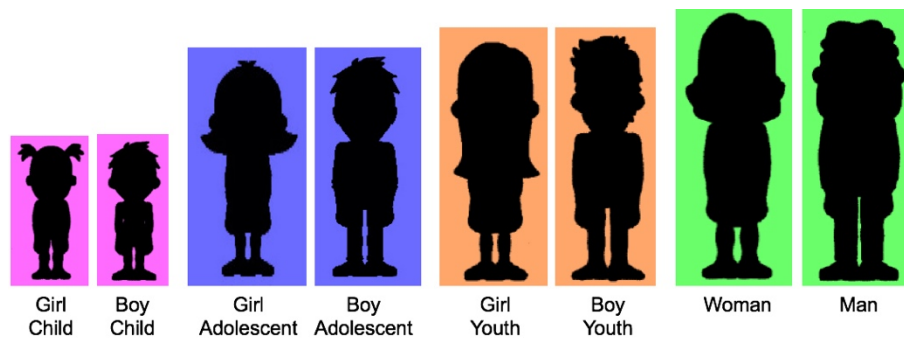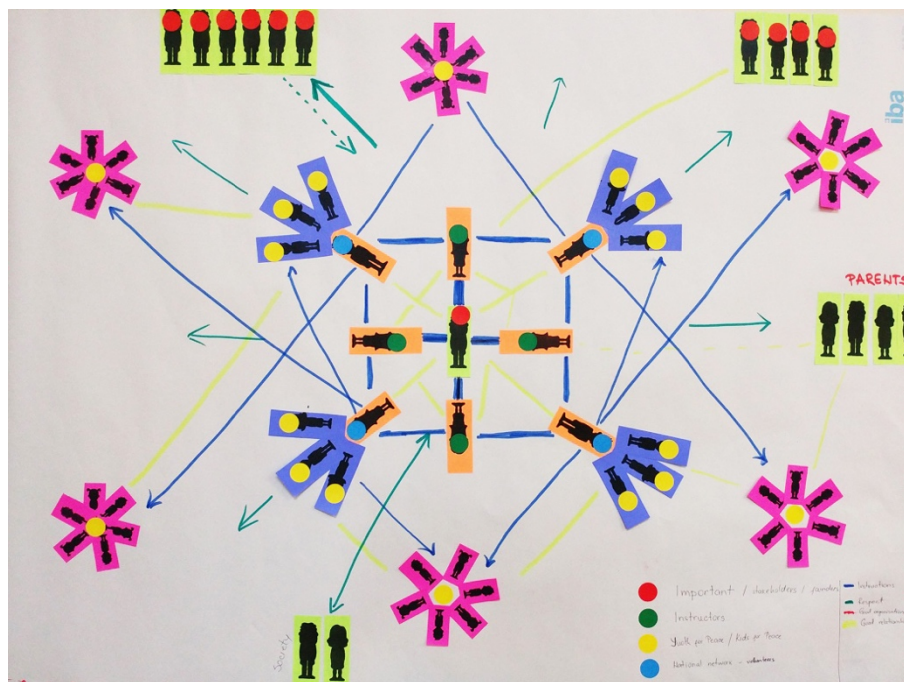
Figure 1. Colour-coded silhouette figures

Figure 2. Organisational Diagram Example

This activity is beneficial to intergenerational groups because it generates a visual representation of the invisible structures of power according to age, gender, and other factors. These power structures are known and felt, but may not be discussed in explicit terms. The diagram is a census of the group and allows for making the power structure explicit in a way that minimises potential conflicts when discussing power imbalances. This is because the discussions are based on data about the group and not only members' opinions. For example, if all of the elected leaders of a group are boys and men, but there are also many girls and women in the group, then there are clearly unequal outcomes based on gender. A group may conduct similar analyses based on age groups or other factors relevant to a particular group.

The Decision-making Chart (Module 6, Tool 11)

The Decision-making Chart is a way to visualise the level of influence members have on specific group decisions. Group members might examine numerous questions, such as:

'Who is in charge of group finances?' and 'Who decides the group's activities and agenda?' The chart is a simple matrix with these questions in the row headings, and the different demographic subgroups in the column headings: young girls, young boys, adolescent girls, adolescent boys, youth girls, youth boys, adult women, and adult men. Participants may, of course, modify these column headings in ways that are appropriate for their group membership, and they might even decide to include columns for specific people or groups, such as an external organisation that provides material, financial, or human resources. Group members then discuss how many individuals in each subgroup participate in the decision listed in each row, and they place small, round, coloured stickers in the box according to a colour-coded system. Red stickers signify that no one in this age and gender group participates in making this decision. Yellow represents that some members participate in the decision. Green represents that all members participate. And blue represents that leaders in this age and gender group have particular influence in this decision (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Decision-making Chart Example

The activity generates a visual representation of group decision-making in a relatively short period of time. Group members can quickly analyse which decisions are more or less inclusive, as well as identify which members of their group have more or less influence in decisions. The interpretation of data is tailored to the context of the group, which means there are no correct or incorrect answers. For example, while a diagram might show that adult women and men do not participate in many decisions, such as making an agenda for weekly activities, this may be preferred if the group strives for younger children to develop their agenda autonomously. However, if this is not the goal, then the same data highlight an area for needed improvement.

Strategies for using these tools with intergenerational groups

Setting the scene for thinking about internal structures of groups, having discussions about the internal power dynamics of groups is not a common practice. In fact, many of the dozens of groups we have trained to facilitate these tools tell us that our workshop was the first time they have reflected on the internal power dynamics of their group. This is not surprising to us. Groups often focus on achieving their members' collective goals rather than discussing how their group's power dynamic lubricates or hinders the decision-making process. For this reason, it is crucial to offer an opportunity to get participants in the mindset of reflecting critically and constructively on aspects of the internal functioning of a group before discussing underlying power dynamics.

In our experience, the most effective way to get into the mindset is through a drama activity, and we recommend using the *Good Group/Bad Group Drama*. This activity is especially useful for balancing intergenerational power dynamics because it puts everyone into an equally powerful and vulnerable position of performing in front of an audience.

In this activity, participants who perform what it means to be a 'good group' often depict scenes of members listening to one another, inviting marginalised members of society to join their meeting, and providing support to group members who need help. Performers of 'bad groups' typically depict chaotic meetings with members shouting at one another or even display verbal or physical violence. Interestingly, audience members identify both good and bad qualities in both 'good' and 'bad' groups. We have seen, for example, a 'bad group' with an authoritarian leader. Fed up with the leader's behaviour, the 'bad group' members collectively decided to walkout and form a new group. While the 'bad group' actors may have intended the dissolution of the groups as a failure, others might see the collective rejection of unfair power dynamics as a success. In this light, it is possible to see how the line between a 'good group' and 'bad group' may be blurred. Such scenarios set the scene to discuss the disorderliness of a group's internal power dynamics.

Working in teams and presenting to one another

The tools in the Article 15 Resource Kit are most useful for critical self-reflection in groups, meaning all members of the group participate in the activities together. This becomes challenging for groups with many members. In these situations, it is best to divide the group into smaller teams to complete the activities. The divided teams can be created randomly or intentionally for comparing the perspectives of different types of group members. For example, groups might work in small teams according to gender (girls/women versus boys/men), age (younger members versus older members), or roles (executive members versus general members). Ideally, these teams are made up of no more than 10 people.

There are at least two major benefits of dividing group members into smaller teams that create their own drama, diagram, or chart. First, it provides greater opportunities for more members to have their voice heard in discussions. Second, splitting groups by gender, age,

group roles, or other demographics allows the perspectives from these subgroups to coalesce before presenting to others.

An effective strategy for sharing Organisational Diagrams and Decision-making Charts is to display them on all the walls in a room, like an art gallery, and allow time for participants in the activity to visit with each. At least one representative stands next to the diagram or chart that their small group created, and the remaining members of other groups wander around the gallery and ask questions (see Figure 4). The diagrams and charts provide a physical reference point for discussion, and through this process of asking questions, organisations discover ways that their group could be more inclusive, transparent, and fair in sharing information and decision-making.

Figure 4. Organisational Diagram Gallery

Participation barriers based on language and ability

Typically, group members share a common language. However, we have also modified workshops at international meetings for participants who speak different languages. The best strategies for handling interpretation will vary according to the time and human resources available. Interpretation is not just about translating from one language to another. It involves careful attention to the perspectives of the speaker. We highly recommend providing professional interpretation services when conducting a workshop on these tools with participants who do not share a common language. And for brief activities during multi-lingual workshops, we even discourage participants from using spoken language at all. There are a number of warm-up activities that facilitators may use that explicitly prohibit speech. For example, we have asked groups of about 30 people to organise themselves into a line or circle alphabetically according to their first names or chronologically according to the month and day or their birthdate. It is surprising how quickly a group discovers ways to accomplish this task without words. It is not without a challenge, but it is this challenge that puts everyone on a more or less equal level of capacity to convey the same type of information. The key, here, is to use this task not only as an energising activity, but also as a connection to discussions about intergenerational group dynamics. Groups with members of different ages inherently represent a range of

capacities. The goal of a speechless activity is to focus participants' attention on our personal privileges and disadvantages when we enter into a shared space. This goes beyond language and includes different mental and physical abilities as well. With the exception of some of the visual components of the methods we have described above, all of the activities may be modified to more appropriately address a group's range of capacities. It is important for group facilitators to be sensitive to participants' needs and collaborate on finding appropriate ways to adapt the activities.

Adapting activities for groups with varying levels of management by children, youth and adults

The activities in the Article 15 Resource Kit were co-developed with and for members of child and youth associations. Therefore, the instructions for the activities are tailored to groups managed by children and youth in partnership with adults. There are varying degrees of how a group might be managed by children, youth or adults, and it is not necessary that a group be a specific type in order to use the tools. We have seen school teachers use the tools to visualise and evaluate school administrations. In fact, we have even seen examples of adult workshop participants adapting the tools to examine the organisational structures and decision-making practices of groups entirely comprised of and managed by adults, such as an industrial design team at a college. In these situations, it is critical that participants document the ways they adapt the tools to fit their particular needs. In most cases, this means including information to help others interpret the silhouette figures and symbols they use, similar to a legend on a map. The tools may not account for all the needs of all groups, but they are flexible and bend to creative redesign.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shared our views about the important roles of international civil society associations, especially those tailored to children and youth, in a larger fabric of a vibrant democratic society. Systematically studying intergenerational groups is essential for addressing issues that affect all members of society because these groups are not exempt from the social norms that shape prejudices based on age, gender, ability, class/caste or other demographics. In fact, these settings have the dangerous potential to reproduce harmful power dynamics that may even contrast a group's formally stated vision of inclusion and non-discrimination. We conclude here with three recommendations for the frame of mind that groups should utilise when embarking on a journey of identifying and resolving harmful power dynamics in intergenerational groups.

The need for continuous self-reflection even in the best groups
An essential group characteristic required to engage in the process we outline above is openness to self-criticism. A dangerous group quality is a sentiment that the group is operating optimally and there is no need for improvement. Even if this might be generally true, continuous monitoring and evaluation of a group's governance is necessary since group goals and activities invariably change over time. Even when most members are content with the strategies they have developed to ensure that all members' opinions are

considered in matters that affect them, new members or younger members may not be well-informed about the organisational structure and decision-making processes of a group. Regular checkpoints, either through open-ended discussions or, preferably, facilitated use of the activities we share above, will help identify and resolve issues as they arise and before intractable conflicts between members develop.

The need for adults to recognise their role in groups, even if they are mostly child-managed

There is a tendency for adults to downplay their role in groups that are mainly managed by children or youth. While this may be well-intentioned humility, it may also be dishonest and obfuscate the true group power dynamics. There is nothing wrong with adults influencing the organisational structures and decision-making processes of child and youth associations, as long as this influence is welcomed by the young people and to a degree that is previously agreed upon. In fact, our experience has been that it is within child and youth associations that young people have meaningful and supportive relationships with adults who are not authority figures in other realms of their lives. This creates incredible opportunities for intergenerational exchanges that build mutual respect and understanding. The key is an unflinching honesty about the balance of power between the younger and older members of a group.

The need to recognise child and youth associations as vital threads in the fabric of civil society

We conclude with the same argument with which we began our discussion: civil associations are a critical component in the fabric of a vibrant, democratic society. There is a need, however, to ensure that adult-managed associations and institutions view child and youth associations as vital threads in this fabric. The distinction between adult associations and associations managed by and for young people is not always clear. There are, at times, pathways from associations of young people into counterpart adult-managed associations. There are also intergenerational associations that strive to be inclusive of a wider range of ages. Whatever the situation, as long as harmful social norms about gender, age, and other demographic statuses persist, every member of a group must be invited into discussions on how best to organise themselves in these civil associations. It is only with a recognition of the inherent power imbalances between generations that these associations might be more effective at accomplishing their goals.

Authors

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