
Lansdown, G. & O’Kane, C. (2016) ‘Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s Participation’, in *Learning for Well-being Magazine*, Issue 1, published by Universal Education Foundation.

Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s Participation

By Gerison Lansdown and Claire O’Kane

This article draws heavily on the Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s Participation published by Save the Children in collaboration with Concerned for Working Children, Plan, World Vision, and UNICEF, written by the authors of this article. It is available and free to download in English, French and Spanish.

In recent years, non-government organisations (NGOs) working to promote children’s rights, as well as governments and donors, have emphasised the need to develop better indicators against which to monitor and measure children’s participation in terms of three key aspects: structure, process and outcomes. Numerous models have been explored, and discussions have taken place across many different agencies and indifferent regions of the world, to identify indicators that are not only meaningful but based on data that can be collected and analysed with relative ease. This article presents the Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s Participation published by Save the Children in collaboration with Concerned for Working Children, Plan, World Vision, and UNICEF. We start by looking briefly at what participation is and why it is important and then we present the toolkit, its content, how it works and some examples of the tools developed.

What is participation and why is it important?

‘We have found there are lots of ways in showing and expressing ourselves to our parents, guardians, to government officials, community leaders, even the adults within our communities. We do this by showing them how useful and important our participation is and our involvement in providing solutions to the issues that affect us. We think that interviewing and questioning people by the use of questionnaires was another way of telling them to ensure our involvement in actions and decisions concerning us... through research, resolving of any problems or issues that affect us, and also asking our friends, family and relatives how children are being involved in decision-making in their various houses.’ (representative of the African Movement of Working Children and Youth, Nigeria)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) introduces a philosophy of respect for children and young people as active participants in their own lives. It recognises that children are not merely passive recipients, entitled to adult protective care but are subjects

of rights who are entitled to be involved, in accordance with their evolving capacities, in decisions that affect them, and are entitled to exercise growing responsibility for decisions they are competent to make for themselves. Article 12, for example, which states that every child who is capable of forming views has the right to express them freely in all matters affecting him or her, and that their views must be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, is a unique provision in a human rights treaty because it addresses the legal and social status of children under the age of 18 years who lack the full autonomy of adults.

However, this poses profound challenges in most regions of the world, where children have not traditionally been deemed to have the experience, knowledge or understanding necessary to be directly involved in contributing to and taking responsibility for major decisions affecting their lives. Since the adoption of the UNCRC in 1989, thousands of initiatives have evolved in all regions of the world to create space for children and young people to begin to influence the laws, policies, services and decisions that affect their lives. On the positive side, these experiences have demonstrated that children and young people have unique perspectives and expertise that can shed light on the challenges they face and on the best strategies for resolving them. When provided with the opportunity, necessary information and support, they can make a significant contribution to decisions affecting their lives and they want greater control over them. Adults commonly underestimate children's capacities but when they see children actively engaged they are invariably positively impressed by what they can actually do. Their participation can make real contributions to the quality of legislation, policy-making and service provision while it also improves skills, confidence and self-esteem. On the other hand experiences have also revealed that the right to participation remains patchy, many countries show little sustained commitment and too little evidence has been gathered on the sustained impact of participation. There is a need for improved indicators and tools with which to measure the work that is being undertaken.

While many children find it difficult to get their voices heard, some groups face additional hurdles, including younger children, girls, children with disabilities, working children or those out of school, children from indigenous or minority communities, and poorer children.

Box 1: Summary of the Basic requirements of ethical participation

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, the international body responsible for monitoring how governments respect children's rights, has drawn together nine basic requirements that need to be in place to ensure that children's participation is effective, ethical and meaningful. They were elaborated as part of the General Comment No.12, 'the right of the child to be heard'.

Participation should be:

- 1 Transparent and informative – children must be provided with full, accessible, and age-appropriate information (that is also sensitive to children’s diversity) about their right to express their views freely.
- 2 Voluntary – children should never be coerced into expressing views against their wishes and they should be informed that they can cease their involvement at any stage.
- 3 Respectful – children’s views have to be treated with respect and children should be provided with opportunities to initiate ideas and activities.
- 4 Relevant – the issues on which children have the right to express their views must be of real relevance to their lives and enable them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities.
- 5 Child-friendly – environments and working methods should be adapted to children’s capacities. Adequate time and resources should be made available to ensure that children are adequately prepared and have the confidence and opportunity to contribute their views.
- 6 Inclusive – participation must be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for marginalised children (girls and boys) to be involved. Children are not a homogenous group and participation needs to provide for equality of opportunity for all, without discrimination on any grounds.
- 7 Supported by training – adults need preparation, skills and support to facilitate children’s participation effectively – for example, they need to develop listening skills, and to know how to work with and engage children in accordance with their evolving capacities.
- 8 Safe and sensitive to risk – in certain situations, encouraging children to express their views may put them at risk. Adults have a responsibility towards the children they are working with and must take every precaution to minimise the risk to children of violence, exploitation or any other negative consequence of their participation.
- 9 Accountable – a commitment to undertaking regular follow-up and evaluation of participation activities is essential. Monitoring and evaluation of children’s participation needs to be undertaken with children themselves at the centre of the process.

Source: G. Lansdown & C. O’Kane, (2014) Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s Participation, published by Save the Children, UK.

The Toolkit: origins and piloting

In response to this need for better tools to monitor and evaluate children's participation, a toolkit was developed and tested. It took as its starting point a document called 'Criteria for the Evaluation of Children's Participation in Programming', produced by Gerison Lansdown in collaboration with partners of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in Brazil in 2004, setting out a conceptual framework for monitoring and evaluating how children participate in projects and programmes. After further developments incorporating perspectives from other parts of the world, this final version was produced following an 18-month pilot, funded by the Oak Foundation, involving ten projects¹ from nine countries in different regions of the world, in partnership with Save the Children, UNICEF, Plan, World Vision and The Concerned for Working Children. The aim of the pilot was to use the toolkit to undertake a rigorous scrutiny of the participation work these organisations were involved in and to give feedback on how well it worked and what could be improved. One of the most powerful messages arising from the pilot was the imperative for organisations working with children and young people to engage in more effective monitoring and evaluation of their participation work.

The toolkit is intended for use by practitioners and children working in participatory programmes, as well as by governments, NGOs, civil society and children's organisations seeking to assess and strengthen children's participation in their wider society. It provides:

- 25 indicators for mapping the extent to which children's participation is institutionalised at different levels of society;
- indicators and tools for monitoring and evaluating the scope, quality and outcomes of children's participation in any given service, programme, initiative or project;
- a 10-step guide to undertaking a participatory monitoring and evaluation process, with children and other stakeholders.

It can be used at different stages of a project or programme to determine the potential of participation, set goals and also to analyse progress in implementing children's participation in specific contexts and to determine priorities for building a culture of respect for children and young people's right to express their views and be taken seriously. It also provides a conceptual framework for measuring children's participation with guidance on how to carry it out.

How the toolkit works – examples

The toolkit provides a range of tools that can be use with different stakeholders, and especially children and young people, to gather and

¹ Participating organisations: Save the Children, Nepal; The Concerned for Working Children, India; Neighbourhood Community Network, India; World Vision, Ghana; World Vision, Zambia; Every Child, Malawi; Plan, Guatemala; Plan, Ecuador; Centre for Education in Health and Environment (CESES MA), Nicaragua; and African Movement of Working Children and Youth, Nigeria.

analyse the information needed to monitor and evaluate the scope, quality and outcomes of children's participation. The tools provided are designed for different age-groups of children and young people living in different contexts and with a range of challenges in their lives. There are:

- a set of basic tools to use with any age, including tools for using with younger children;
- tools to introduce participatory monitoring and evaluation;
- tools to gather baseline data;
- tools to measure scope of children's participation;
- tools to measure quality of children's participation;
- tools to measure outcomes of children's participation;

These sets of tools include standard approaches to monitoring and evaluation such as interviews, questionnaires or surveys, focus group discussions, observation, explaining in each case the advantages, the conditions and a practical guideline, as well as examples of how these methods have been used for measuring children's participation. Additionally there are participatory tools such as mapping, scoring, ranking, drawing, drama, and stories all of which can be effective in transforming power relations among adults and children to influence the agenda, flow and content of discussion during monitoring and evaluation processes. The emphasis in these cases is on the process undertaken and on the need for practitioners carrying out the monitoring to be active listeners, and to work in partnership with children and young people as evaluators. Furthermore because these tools use visual impressions and representation of ideas, they do not rely on reading and writing skills.

In the next section we give an example of tools to measure scope, quality and outcomes of participation, including some tools that can be used with younger children.

a. Measuring scope:

This is about measuring the different types and range of opportunities that children have for participation and understanding how they fall into one of the following categories: children not involved, consultative, collaborative, or child-led.

Example: Puppets

Puppets are a fun way to explore younger children's views and experiences about how they are currently involved in projects, which may reveal findings about the scope, quality and outcomes of their participation. By talking through the puppets, children are more able to say things that they would not feel confident saying as themselves. The facilitator uses a puppet to ask children to tell him/her about the project, which activities they like best and why, what they do not like and why, as well as asking about who decides what the children will do, whether adults ask them what they would like to do, how they feel when adults listen to them or do not listen to them, etc. The children can also be given puppets to talk through.

What do children say about this exercise?

'I like the puppets' (young child, India)

b. Measuring quality:

These tools seek to understand the quality of the participation and the extent to which it respects the nine requirements for ethical participation e.g. is it child-friendly, respectful, voluntary, inclusive, etc. (see box 1).

Example: Pots and stones

This is a game you can use to discuss and score the quality of the children's participation process. It enables children and young people (and others) to score how well each of the nine 'requirements' for effective and meaningful participation are met. The activity also encourages sharing of ideas on what more can be done to meet the quality standards. Children work in small groups with one pot for each of the nine basic requirements and a maximum of three stones for each pot. They are asked to place 0, 1, 2 or 3 stones in each pot depending on how they feel the requirement has been met:

- 0 stones = Not at all
- 1 stone = there is an awareness of the requirement but it is not reflected in practice
- 2 stones: efforts are made to address the requirement but no systematic procedures are in place.
- 3 stones= the requirement is fully understood, implemented and monitored.

The role of the adult facilitator is to encourage discussion, ask questions, identify weaknesses and strengths and make decisions.

What do children say about this exercise?

'The pots and stones tool allows us to see progress in the quality of our participation over time if we make repeated use of it. We liked how the number of stones is determined. It is participatory. It is easy to understand how it works. It is easy to carryout, and it is fun.' (Plan Togo)

'It was not easy for us to understand the meaning of the nine basic requirements. To make it easy for us to work with the tool, we recommend that you take enough time to explain the nine standards to us through real-life examples. Words like "accountable" are not easy for us to grasp! You can help us better understand the standards through games and fun role-plays. You also need to make sure that everybody participates.' (Plan Togo)

c. Measuring outcomes:

The aim here is to understand the outcomes of children's participation, and what has been achieved by the end of an initiative, programme or project. If baseline monitoring was undertaken, these results can be

compared with the objectives that were identified for the situation at the beginning of the process.

Example: Stories of most significant change

Significant change can be shared by children or other stakeholders on a regular basis through stories, poetry, drawings, paintings, drama, photos in diaries; or through drama, song, or puppetry, which could be filmed. Stories, drawings and drama can be effective tools in gathering information on behavioural or attitudinal and wider external outcomes – positive or negative. It can be done on a regular basis throughout the lifecycle of a project or programme giving children time over a few weeks to gather and develop their stories in creative ways.

What do children say about this exercise?

‘It was the Stories of most significant change that made us bring out our creative best. Children acted out their best stories of achievements through children’s parliaments.’ (NCN, India)

Conclusions and lessons learned

Agencies involved in piloting the Toolkit shared positive results both in terms of the benefits of involving children and young people in evaluation processes, and in terms of the outcomes of children’s participation. Through application and learning from the M&E process, children and practitioners have been able to assess and improve the quality of the participation process; and they have been able to use the results for evidence-based advocacy with donors and governments to increase support for children’s participation. The experience enabled them to identify some of the areas where they needed to strengthen their participation, for example, to become more inclusive and to improve protection. It also highlighted the importance of adults being prepared to create spaces where children feel safe to engage in dialogue and provide constructive criticism.

Examples of significant outcomes from children’s participation process in their local contexts identified by children and adults in diverse contexts included:

- children have greater awareness of rights;
- children have heightened self-esteem and acquisition of leadership skills;
- children have improved confidence to negotiate with adults;
- parents have greater sensitivity to and understanding towards children’s rights;
- staff have more positive attitudes towards children;
- reduced incidence of child marriage;
- more municipal commitment to engagement with children;
- political commitment to institutional participation and replicate programmes.

When children have been allowed to participate in decisions that concern their lives, they report that:

‘We feel empowered with knowledge about our rights. More of us are growing in confidence to speak out on violence.’
(World Vision Zambia)

‘We learnt to share our ideas and issues more with the adults in the community and in our local government.’
(Children’s organisations facilitated by CWC, India)

In efforts to increase the realisation of children’s participation rights, and to ensure a focus on effective and ethical participation, more and more agencies (non-government and government) are encouraged to use the Toolkit, and to share the results. In collaboration with other child-focused agencies, Child to Child is in the process of developing a Digital Hub that will create a space for uploading and disseminating monitoring and evaluation results on children’s participation, so that we can collectively expand and make good use of the growing evidence base.

Authors

Gerison Lansdown was the founder director of the Children’s Rights alliance for England and is now an international children’s rights consultant and advocate who has published and lectured widely on the subject of children’s rights. She is co-director of Child Rights Education for Professionals, through which she has developed curricula on child rights for health workers in many countries. She was actively involved in the negotiations for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is a senior associate of the International Institute for Child Rights and Development in Victoria, and Chair of the Child-to-Child Trust.

Claire O’Kane is an international child rights consultant who is passionate about children and young people’s participation. She is a qualified social worker with more than 20 years of experience in child rights, participation, citizenship, protection, care and peace-building work in development and emergency contexts especially in the Asia and Africa regions. She has worked with Save the Children, Child to Child, and other child-focused agencies and has written more than 50 publications.

Reference

G. Lansdown & C. O’Kane, (2014), Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s Participation, published by Save the Children (UK) in collaboration with Concerned for Working Children, Plan, World Vision, and UNICEF.