

Scope of Child Participation
Within the National Plan of Action for Children 2005 in India:
Promises to Keep and Miles to Go....

Parul Sheth
Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow 2011

India
University Of California, Davis

Author Note

This paper was prepared as part of the pre-academic training at
University of California, Davis

OUTLINE

Thesis: In the National Plan of Action for Children in India there is very little opportunity for children to participate in the decisions pertaining to their lives. Nevertheless, child participation in the planning and implementing process could create more realistic and child-friendly resolutions to issues pertaining to children.

- I. What is the scope of Child Participation within NPAC
 - A. The UNCRC and NPAC
 - B. The scope available for children to raise their concern or express their needs within the framework of NPAC
- II. How much have we achieved that was promised in NPAC?
 - A. The formal, informal space/ platform available to the children to participate
 - B. The measures undertaken by the government and other civil society groups to enhance child participation
 - C. The gaps, limitations and challenges in providing effective child participation
- III. What measures are required to expand the scope of child participation?
 - A. Scope of enhancing child participation in communities
 - B. Scope of enhancing child participation in society
- IV. Conclusion and Summary

Scope of Child Participation

Within the National Plan of Action for Children 2005 in India:

“Promises to keep and miles to go....”¹

“We are citizens today, not tomorrow” is the slogan of children who are now standing up strongly for their rights in India (Children from Karnataka, 2010, p.2). They also believe that “No decisions about us can be taken without us.” Among all other rights given to children, the right to participation is the most complex, abstract, and neglected. After ratifying the UN Convention on Rights of the Children (UNCRC)² in 1992, India started the process of formulating the National Plan of Action for Children (NPAC)³ which was approved in 2005. In the Plan there is very little opportunity for children to participate in the decisions pertaining to their lives. Nevertheless, child participation in the planning and implementing process could create more realistic and child-friendly resolutions to children’s issues.

The UNCRC is the first formal, guiding document accepted by the UN in November, 1989⁴. As far back as 1923, at the end of the First World War, Save the Children initiated the discussion about the rights of children focusing on the children who were victims of war. However, it took the adults of the world sixty-six long years before they could create an accepted policy ensuring the rights of the children who constitute 20% of the world’s population!! India ratified the UNCRC in December, 1992 and initiated the NPAC in 2005. Like the UNCRC, the NPAC was developed by adults with no involvement of children. There is little mention of child

¹The quote is from Robert Frost’s poem “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”

²UNCRC - United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children

³NPAC - National Plan of Action for Children - India

⁴UN – United Nations

participation in this principle document governing the children of India who constitute about 44% of the total Indian population.

The Scope of Child Participation within the Framework of NPAC

The goals and objectives of the NPAC are fairly broad, providing scope to children to participate at home, schools, communities, and institutions. It mentions the right of children to be heard in legal proceedings, as well as in matters that affects their lives. The assurance is expressed to provide information to the children in an easy manner. There is a long list of strategies which outline the roles of adults rather than children in promoting the child rights. There is extra emphasis given to the participation rights of girls and making information available to children including information about the NPAC itself. Although, for the first time, there is mention of promoting various children's organizations and networks, it refers only to informal groups. The government has not made any attempt to create any authentic structure at any level that provides a scope for children to express their views.

The Informal Platform available for Child Participation

In the past two decades, a handful of non-governmental organizations (NGOs)⁵ that work with children have made some successful endeavors where children have played the role of protagonists and have significantly contributed in the policy formulation affecting their lives. These NGOs effectively enhanced the capability of children by providing children training on child rights, helping them to understand and analyze the situations to make informed choices in child-friendly, safe, and conducive environments. Time and again, children have proven that

⁵NGOs - Non-governmental organizations

given the opportunity, they can make very prudent and matured decisions. These organizations are raising awareness amongst parents, training teachers, sensitizing the policy makers and community leaders about child rights. Children have participated in policy formation, analysis and recommendations for improving the policies, programs, National Five Year Plans etc. The children of Karnataka made recommendations to NPAC (Children from Karnataka, 2010). Children of Gujarat prepared Alternative Report to submit to UN (Children of Gujarat, 2008). In state of Karnataka, the government has made it mandatory to involve children while formulating village plan. Children's organizations have lobbied with party candidates during various elections, helping children enhance their capabilities as skilled, democratic citizens. The National Forum for Child Participation has been established by children's organizations across the country.

The Challenges in Providing Effective Child Participation

Though children have demonstrated examples of participation, one must admit that these are scattered. At times these efforts appear more like tokenism rather than real participation. Except Karnataka, in no other state government has embodied to create formal, legitimate structures for the children to participate. The other major challenge is that, traditionally in Indian patriarchal and hierarchical structures, children are viewed as the 'recipients' or 'service seekers' and not as 'right holders' or 'change makers.' It is easy for adults to 'provide,' but not to treat children as partners. All government programs view children as 'beneficiaries'. It is difficult for the parents, teachers, community leaders, government officials, policy makers to fully comprehend the idea of child participation. Though children are often aware of their rights due to their involvement with NGOs, adults around them have no such

understanding, which can be frustrating for children. There are few NGOs working *'with'* children than there are working *'for'* them with rights-based perspective and only a handful of organizations uphold participation as a core priority. As a result efforts remain dispersed and ineffectual and having no significant impact or influence on policy makers. Most organizations are working with vulnerable children so privileged children remain desensitized to the issues of disadvantaged children.

Underprivileged children have many pressures in their personal lives, such as working in and outside the home. Girls are conventionally not allowed to go out of the house or mix with boys, and in many cases, they have to marry at a very young age. Children are abused, discriminated, and neglected. Their access to quality of health and education services is limited, preventing them from reaching their full potential. Those who attend school are under pressure to study and perform well. All these factors make it hard for children to actively participate, particularly when they move to higher grades.

Other challenge of participation is that it is a time-consuming, intangible, and long-term process. A lot of patience is required because participation is a process, not a program. It is difficult to acquire enough financial resources for the participation programs because the outcomes are qualitative. Participation is more difficult with segment of the children because their population is constantly changing.

Measures Required to Expand Scope of Child Participation

The foremost requirement of successful participation is “political will” by government to allow children to participate by creating formal, legitimate spaces. If government can create system and structures that allow platform for children to play an active role in decision-making

process, it can certainly lead to effective child participation. If government makes it mandatory, adults will also start listening and respecting views of children. If government lays down formal procedures, children can contribute their opinions leading to child-friendly policies, plans, laws, programs, and schemes. At present, the central government only spends an average of 5% of its total budget on children who constitute 44% of the population of the nation (Census of India, 2011). It will not only enhance the self-esteem, self-confidence, and capabilities of children, but also reduce child abuse and exploitation. This process of child empowerment will lead to holistic development of children, allowing them to contribute to the sustainable development of society.

Some Suggestions to Create the Structures that can Enhance Child Participation

- In every community there should to be a child-friendly space reserved exclusively for children to come together and participate in activities. This must be easily accessible to all children without any discrimination. A special fund should be set aside to provide enough resources for children's activities.
- In each area a group of children could be formed, facilitated by a trained local *Baldost*⁶ who are selected by the children themselves. These *Baldosts* should be trained and qualified and the government can pay them some honorariums.
- Local schools can take more initiative to support groups in their neighboring areas and teachers can provide active support to the *Baldosts*. These *Baldosts* must receive regular refresher training to enhance their capabilities to work as facilitators. This will involve all school children and will enhance unity among them.
- In each area a joint committee comprised of children and adults can be formed to identify issues affecting children. Any child facing problems can receive support from this committee. This

⁶*Baldost* (literally means Friend of children) or child rights activist

committee would play a role of a Child Protection Committee. This committee would protect the interests of each child in the area. For example, ensuring that each child goes to school, no child goes to work or enters into child marriage.

- At the village/city level a group of children can be elected from different groups within neighborhoods who can play a role in decision-making process. This could be in rotation for a period of about two years. In same manner representatives from village/city can form groups at block, district, state and finally, at national level. As shown in the picture, the children must be inclusive of all genders, castes, religions, languages, and physical abilities, etc. to ensure that concern of each group of children is well represented. Each of this children's group must receive the intensive ongoing training on child rights by qualified facilitators. Eventually when they grow up, they can play the role of *Baldosts*.
- These children's groups can be consulted during formulation of any scheme, program, policy, law, plan, budget etc. which could have implications on children. These children's views must be taken into account while finalizing document. These children can thus play an important role in governance as they were involved right from planning stage and understood spirit. These children can also be consulted in preparation of country report, which needs to be submitted to the Child Rights Committee of the UN periodically. This whole process will lead to bottom up planning.

The task may look humongous, but, if there is political will to ensure equal rights to all children, it is not impossible. A few decades ago, when women around the globe raised their voices for rights, it did not sound achievable, but today; gender equality is part of the UN Millennium Development Goals (2011). The concern is that children are not organized so the

Figure 1
Children electing their Leaders



Note. The picture is part of the photo documentation of Shaishav.

obligation is on adults for providing them platform. As Gandhi said, “If we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children.”

References

- 100 people: A World Portrait, A Global Education Toolbox. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.100people.org/statistics_100stats.php?section=statistics
- Bajpai, A. (2006). *Child Rights in India Law, Policy, and Practice* New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Census of India. Ministry of Home Affairs. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.imaginmor.com/census-of-india-2011.html>
- Children from Karnataka. (July 2010). *Situational Analysis and Recommendations*. Retrieved from <http://www.workingchild.org/>
- Convention on the Rights of the Child, Adopted and opened by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989. Retrieved from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>
- Fletcher, A. (2011). *Ladder of Youth Voice*. Retrieved from <http://www.freechild.org/ladder.htm>
- Forst, R. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. (1923). Retrieved from <http://www.ketzle.com/frost/snowyeve.htm>
- Gandhi, M. K. (1931). Speech at Montessori Training College in London. Retrieved from <http://www.peace.ca/montessoriandgandhi.htm>
- Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2007). *A World Fit for Children*. A National Report on National Plan of Action for Children. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/worldfitforchildren/files/India_WFFC5_Report.pdf

New York. Retrieved from

[http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/\(2011_E\)%20MDG%20Report%202011_Book%20LR.pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/(2011_E)%20MDG%20Report%202011_Book%20LR.pdf) Goals Report

Panikar, R. (2008, January - March). *First Call for children*. Learning to Fly, 19, 2. Retrieved from http://www.butterflieschildrights.org/downloads/but_14.pdf

Save the Children. (2009). *Communities for Children; Selected Good Practices in Improving Children's Well-being through Community Participation*. Retrieved from

http://www.savethechildren.in/custom/recent-publication/communities_for_children.pdf

Save the Children. (May 2011). *Quality Education Position Paper*. Retrieved from

http://www.savethechildren.in/images/resources_documents/quality%20education.pdf

Shaishav. (2008). *Alternative Report on the situation of children in Gujarat*. Retrieved from

<http://shaishavchildrights.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/alternative-report.pdf>

Shaishav. (2011). *Shaishav* (Brochure). Retrieved from

<http://shaishavchildrights.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/shaishav-brochure.pdf>

United Nations. (2011). *The Millennium Development Goals Report*. United Nations

Wakeford, T. and Singh, J. (Eds.) (2008) Towards empowered participation: stories and reflections *Participatory Learning and Action*, 58 -. Retrieved from

<http://www.planotes.org/index.html>