PARTICIPATION IS A HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLE, AND AS SUCH, IT IS NOT A GIFT OR PRIVILEGE BESTOWED BY ADULTS ON CHILDREN, BUT THE RIGHT OF EVERY CHILD CAPABLE OF EXPRESSING A VIEW. IN OTHER WORDS, IT IS A RIGHT FOR ALL CHILDREN – ESPECIALLY THE MOST MARGINALIZED AND VULNERABLE IN SOCIETY.1

SUMMARY

It is around 25 years since United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It is arguably the most extensively ratified human rights treaty in the world. It was a major step forward in setting standards on children’s issues, as it recognizes rights of children taking them beyond the notion of protection. The CRC is comprehensive, giving equal importance and recognition to civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. During the initial years, the focus was on the issues related to protection, which gradually developed into a better understanding on all the rights, including the right to participation.

It is with this premise, that Oxfam India has evolved an understanding of the importance of including and empowering the most direct beneficiaries of its Essential Services-Education Programme, i.e the children themselves. Oxfam’s gives a great thrust to Child Participation in its goal of “Increasing people’s access to quality, universal and inclusive elementary education in the mainstream public education system”. To achieve this, a comprehensive approach of empowering all stakeholders has formed the core of its programming.

The present note captures the successful strategy of Child Participation, adopted by one of the partners of Oxfam India- Shikhar Yuva Manch (SYM) in Chhattisgarh.

1 Karunan, Victor P, Concept Note on Child Participation
INTRODUCTION

The idea participation had gained prominence as an important programming strategy, where for the most part it meant involving adult community members. It was not until two decades ago that organisations working on children’s issues began emphasis on the participation of the children, creating a shift in the thinking to recognizing children as bearers of rights. This gained further momentum by the ratification of the UNCRC almost universally. The CRC played a key role in bringing in a shift in the practice and attitudes of organisation working with children. The CRC helped change the perception of a child “as a vulnerable human being requiring protection from the family, society and the state” to “a subject of rights who is able to form and express opinions and is able to participate in decision making processes and influence solutions, to intervene as a partner in the process of social change and in the building of democracy.”. It further supported that “children can no longer be perceived as not yet person, waiting in the lobby of life to become mature by the magic effect of reaching the age of maturity”. They are not simply the passive recipients of care or of adult’s decisions.

But it is said that children’s participation is nothing new. A UNICEF study points out that, “children have always participated in life: in the home, in school, in work, in communities, in wars”. Then what is the participation that development organisations and child focused organisations seek to promote? While children were always involved in family and community life, their participation is not always recognized and moreover they are not included in decision making processes. For international NGOs and UN agencies, children’s participation is understood as a means of preparing the young for their future role in a liberal democracy. They need to be empowered to play a part in existing decision-making processes and structures of governance. The Millennium Development Goals and Education for All has given further impetus to this notion and had encouraged organisations to give the required attention to Children’s participation in development programmes and initiatives.

WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES OF CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION?

Achieving children’s full participation in community development is a complex challenge for development agencies. It would seem to require organisations to subscribe to certain principles that will govern the way they work with children and their communities. Given below are proposed principles of participatory programming with children, explained in the study.

- Non-discrimination and inclusiveness
- Democracy and equality of opportunity
- The physical, emotional and psychological safety of participants
- Adult responsibility
- Voluntarism, informed consent and transparency
- Participation should be an enjoyable and stimulating experience

POSITIVE IMPACTS OF CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION

The positive impacts of children’s participation can be seen at four levels - Children, Family, Community and Family:

| CHILDREN | • Increased self confidence and self esteem | • Enhanced knowledge and information | • Better social personal skills | • Sense of responsibility and ownership |
| FAMILY | • Better support and understanding by parents | • Social independence, especially girls | • Increased role in family decision making | • Acknowledgement and recognition of achievements |
| COMMUNITY | • Peer solidarity | • Increased community awareness of children’s issues | • Improved status of children with the community | • Holistic community development |
| INSTITUTIONAL | • Improvements in schooling | • Enhanced processes and institutions of governance | • Better functioning of related agencies |

As with every strategy, there are also challenges in seeking children participation. Some of which are:

- It requires considerable time and energy of children, which they usually devote towards domestic responsibilities, school work etc.
- There could be a possibility of a conflict of interest between parents and children, if the latter takes on or question larger community issues. These could also be social issues that directly affect children like child marriage, domestic violence and abuse etc.

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2 Child Participation and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Santos Plas, M
3 Understanding and evaluating children’s participation in development, Plan International
HOW CAN CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION BE PUT INTO PRACTICE?

The above-mentioned study has identified a few important factors that need to be considered for facilitating children’s participation. They are:

DEDICATED SPACE AND SUITABLE LOCATION:

- Usually for most children, adults’ control over them extends beyond their homes to most or all of the formal spaces that they inhabit. Sometimes, adults determine the nature and type of activities for children in the schoolroom, the home, different institutional locales within their village or larger community.

- Related to the issue of space, is also the issue of location of the space where participatory activities can be undertaken. Some important parameters to consider are, is the location conducive to participation: that is inclusive, readily accessible and comfortable to all children, and where an open, cooperative working environment is possible. Another important factor is the underpinnings of hierarchy of caste, religion and ethnicity. The location should be unrestricted by these, so that all children feel free and equal.

FACILITATION

- The provision of support and guidance from adults is vital for the success of any participatory project and the well-being of participants. It has been noted in most cases that children’s participation cannot continue and achieve its stated objective without adult guidance and involvement.

SUPPORT, ESPECIALLY FUNDING

- As most children’s participatory projects are fairly long-term though there could be some short term initiatives like involvement in campaign, preparation of resource material for trainings, advocacy etc. However, the maximum impact on children’s lives is likely to be achieved by projects that continue over few years. This, of course, implies that there will be secure sources of funding. In addition, it is important to note that effective children’s participation would entail a variety of costs. Therefore, these costs have to be recognized and met.

CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION AND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION ACT

The SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) Framework of Implementation acknowledges that children’s participation in universalizing equitable access, retention and quality is an important and desirable catalyst for realization of their right to education. It recognizes that without children’s participation in the schooling process, schools cannot be made child-friendly and child-centered. It emphasizes on ensuring children’s active participation in school management and development through the formation of Children’s Cabinet, Children’s Parliament, Meena Manch etc in every school⁴.

Further, The Right to Education Act, 2009, progressively acknowledges the importance of children’s participation in the constitution of the SMCs. The School Management Committee (SMC), responsible for monitoring the smooth functioning of the school by mapping the School Development Plan and ensuring fair usage of funds and grants, is mandated to have a 75% composition from parents or guardians. The remaining 25% is to be a summation of one-third from the local authority, one-third from the school- teachers and one-third from the local educationalist or children. Thus, while there isn’t a compulsory mandate to include children in the monitoring process of the schools, there is space given for such inclusion.

OXFAM INDIA’S SUPPORT TO CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES

As mentioned in the summary above, Oxfam India’s partner Shikhar Yuva Manch (SYM) in Chhattisgarh has successfully adopted the strategy of Child Participation in its programmes and initiatives.

Some of the successes of this model are:

- FORMATION OF BAL PANCHAYATS AS A PLATFORM FOR THE CHILDREN TO COME TOGETHER AND IDENTIFY AND COLLECTIVELY REACH AT SOLUTIONS THAT CONCERN THEM

- AN INNOVATIVE RADIO SHOW, AAO BACHCHO(COME CHILDREN) BROADCASTED LOCALLY EACH WEEK, WHERE THE CHILDREN SPEAK ON TOPICS AND ISSUES RELATED TO CHILD RIGHTS

- CONDUCTING BAL MELA’S (CHILDREN FAIRs), A FESTIVAL WHERE CHILDREN COME TOGETHER PARTICIPATE IN EXTRA CIRCULAR ACTIVITIES AND ALSO GET THE OPPORTUNITY TO INTERACT AND BUILD RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS, ESPECIALLY THE GOVERNMENT.

- CREATION OF CHILD-CENTERED SPACES CALLED BAL BHAWAN, A PHYSICAL CHILD FRIENDLY SPACE FOR ALL CHILDREN OF THE COMMUNITY.

- CONDUCTING SHIKSHA SAMMELLAN (EDUCATION SUMMIT), WHERE THE CURRENT STATUS OF EDUCATION AND ISSUES OF CHILD RIGHTS ARE PRESENTED AND DELIBERATED UPON.

⁴ SSA- Framework of Implementation— accessed online at http://ssa.ap.nic.in/FrameWork_Final.pdf
Shikhar Yuva Manch (SYM) was started by a team of young and devoted volunteers in 1997 having varied experiences in social work. SYM works for the development and empowerment of the marginalized communities especially the tribal communities in the districts of Chhattisgarh. They also work for the promotion of human rights and conservation of natural resources. SYM’s vision is to create an equal, equitable, self-reliant, progressive and non-violent society.\(^5\)

In the past SYM had partnered with various organisations to promote the education of children in the age group of 6 to 14 in various districts of Chhattisgarh. With Oxfam’s support SYM works with around 38 schools (31 primary and upper primary schools, 3 residential schools) and 35 Aaganwadis of 32 villages in Pali block of Korba district. The total outreach of children through this initiative are 1700 in Aaganwadis and 2200 in Schools, and roughly 500 community members are mobilized for better implementation of RTE.

The primary objective under this project is “to ensure availability of quality education and entitlements, for all children, as per RTE norms, through a process of People Centred Monitoring and Advocacy”\(^6\). Children’s participation forms the primary component of SYM’s strategy to improve the education delivery system in the project area along with community participation and community based monitoring. The following are the approaches adopted by them to empower and involve the community:

- **Children’s Participation** - Mainly through Bal Panchayats, organizing balmelas, creating child-centred spaces in the villages and providing them a platform through the radio to make their concerns heard.

- **Village volunteers** - A cadre of motivated individuals belonging to the local communities who act as primary point of contact between SYM and local communities.

- **Community Based Organisations** (CBOs) have been formed to create a better interface between public services and the community at large.

- **Creation and strengthening of School Management Committees** (SMCs).

- The village volunteers engage with PRIs to make them aware of the RTE provision and role of Panchayat in delivery of education services.

Their strategy to engage the community in monitoring the education system is thus multi-pronged, where the community is involved through various stakeholders- the children, the parents, the local government institution, the community organisations and other motivated village members. Among these, the children are the most direct stakeholders, the immediate beneficiaries of the RTE Act and its implementation. Therefore, involving them in the monitoring, execution and advocacy aspects is logical, and most importantly it ensures that the implementation of the RTE Act is sensitive to their requirement, the primary beneficiaries.

Each of the above mentioned strategy will be detailed out in the below sections.

**BAL PANCHAYATS**

The primary purpose of formation of Bal Panchayats to function as a platform for the children to come together, identify and collectively reach at solutions that concern them. Further, it provides a child-friendly space for children to learn and understand their rights and entitlements. These are school level groups founded by the children themselves, with facilitation from the SYM team. The SYM team holds regular meetings with the Bal Panchayat members, building their capacity on the RTE Act, Child Rights and provisions and entitlements in place for the children. Each group includes one teacher in-charge for facilitation and SYM staff regularly attends the meetings of the group.

A Bal Panchayat has been formed in each of the thirty-two project villages with 378 children as members with 187 girls and 191 boys. The Panchayats are reconstituted every academic year, for ensuring rotation leadership among children. Further conscious efforts are made to strike a gender balance and ensure active participation of girls. The Bal Panchayats have succeeded in creating a conducive environment for the children to express themselves and have increased their confidence to speak up on issues openly. Girls, in particular, have become very active and are able to express themselves freely without the usual hesitation and inhibition.

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6. Proposal 2013-14, Oxfam Education Programme; SYM.
The Bal Panchayat members have been successful in encouraging irregular or out-of-school peers to return to school or enrol for the first time. In turn supporting SYM’s focus on reducing drop-out rate and increasing enrolment of drop-out children.

The panchayat sessions have also resulted in filing of seven applications by children on issues such as appointment of teachers, regularization of teachers, quality of mid-day meal, appointment of a sweeper. The bal panchayats have played an important role in the regularization of mid-day meal as well as other important improvements across multiple villages.

**VOICE THROUGH RADIO**

SYM has collaborated with the local radio network and provided a platform for the children in their project area to raise their concerns to a larger audience. **Aao Bachcho** (come children) is an innovative radio show broadcasted locally (in Bilaspur) each week on All India Radio (AIR). In this show, the children members of Bal Panchayats come and speak on topics related to child rights and education, and put forward any concern or issues faced/observed by them with respect to their school or education in general. SYM prepares the participating children, and help facilitate the show and their performance. The show quite literally gives the children a voice on these and other important issues on a wider platform. It functions as a tool not only for empowerment, but also helps takes forward the advocacy agenda as authorities are forced to pay attention, given the broad outreach and popularity of the show.

**BAL MELAs**

Bal melas or Children’s fairs are viewed as the entry point, which provides an opportunity for the SYM to develop a strong relationship with the children before the formation of children groups. Bal melas were organized in four clusters of 37 schools where all the school going children have been invited to participate. Various games, competitions and other activities are organized in the mela that the children enjoy and which also gives them an opportunity to explore different extra-curricular interests. Besides providing an opportunity to build relationships with SYM, the melas also provide opportunities to the children to develop a dialogue with the other stakeholders in education. Therefore, SMC members, teachers and community members are involved and invited to these events. In a few of Bal melas, government officials were also invited making the Bal mela take up the form of a social audit on RTE, where gaps and challenges in implementation are documented and raised appropriately.

**SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD**

**SHARDA– CONFIDENT PRESIDENT OF BAL PANCHAYAT**

Sharda, a nine-year-old girl studying in Class 5, in Budganiha Para Village of Korba District of Chattisgarh. Budganiha Para is small village with a population of 320, with all of the 52 families depending on agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. The village has a primary school, in which Sharda was studying in Class 4, when Shikar Yuva Manch began its work.

Sharda was a very shy and timid girl who hardly spoke or mingled with others. During the formation meeting of Bal Panchayat in the school, the team of SYM couldn’t help but notice Sharda as she was one of the few children who did not even utter a single word throughout the meeting. She was enrolled as a member but she continued to remain aloof. The team of SYM gave Sharda special attention and tried to understand her. They even spoke to her parents about her but they couldn’t be of much help, shrugging it as reserved nature. As activities like sports, drawing and art competitions etc. began with the children of the Bal Panchayat, there was a transformation in Sharda. She slowly started opening up and participating in the activities. She was particularly interested in drawing and arts and expressed herself brilliantly through it.

Seeing this and the interest of other children, the team of SYM took up the idea of providing a permanent place for the children in the village with the SMC. A place where children can come together after school hours, interact with each other and spend time in pursuing their interests and hobbies. After a discussion with the community members, SMC identified a room and decided to use it for conducting such activities. After seeing the success of the initiative, in the following year, the community and SMC constructed a building and named it as ‘Bal Bhawan’. SYM team helped them procure reading materials, sports and playing material and drawing material for children.

One of the most regular and active visitor to Bal Bhawan was Sharda. She slowly started mingling with other children and started making friends. This increased her self confidence in not only school but also in the community. During the following academic year, she was chosen as the President of the Bal Panchayat by the children themselves. Today, Sharda is studying in Class 5 and is a role model to other children in her village. She now acts a peer motivator and encourages all the children to go to school regularly.
Bal Bhawan is an initiative towards creation of child-centered spaces in each of the project village. Generally, SYM encourages a community member to provide a room in their house to be used as a “Bal Bhawan”. These are child-friendly spaces under the complete control of the children of the community. The children have total access to these spaces/rooms and can come here whenever they want, without any adult or outside interference. This helps build camaraderie, confidence, autonomy and feeling of importance and ownership. Here, they are free to engage and express themselves in various way; extracurricular talents and interests are nurtured here. Various toys, games, arts and sports materials are available for the children so that they can enjoy themselves in a healthy positive environment.

Moreover, coming to the Bal Bhawan has been found to condition and prepare the children for a classroom setting and peer interaction environment within schools, which is especially beneficial for the out-of-school children and the irregular students. Further, interaction between the out-of-school as well as the in-school students within a child-friendly space helps creates some healthy peer pressure and encouragement from the latter to the former to enroll in or get back to schools.

Shiksha Sammellan (Education Summit)
Siksha Sammellans are held annually, as a two-day district level events to disseminate the status of education from village level to district level. This is one more way to increase the participation of children in the monitoring of education. The community, SMC members and school children share their experiences and issues related to education. These events serve to create a space and opportunity to build rapport among the various stakeholders, to increase awareness and to disseminate important information concerning the education status in the community. Efforts are made to incorporate youth and youth groups (such as Bal Panchayats). This ensures that actions at the district level are in touch with local realities, and that problems at the local level receive adequate attention. For instance, children members of the Bal Panchayat are made to present the finding and results of the enrolment campaigns organized by SYM as well as the fact sheet on the status of child education in the Sammellan.

Conclusion and Learning
The primary learning emerging from the practice of Children’s participation is that it is imperative that children are an indivisible part of the activities and programmes
implemented for their benefit. Further, their participation cannot be seen as mere engagement and involvement but as an important stakeholder in the entire decision making processes.

Shikha Yuva Manch’s initiatives have helped in generating evidence on ground on the need and relevance of incorporating the strategy of children’s participation as non-negotiable in the programmes directly benefitting or impacting children.

Education has an impact not only on a society but also the future of the country. Thus, a wide variety of stakeholders and decision makers are involved in both formulating as well implementing policies. The students/children continue to be the most direct beneficiaries impacted by these policies. Therefore, for the success of any of the provisions on education, the first step to be undertaken is to position children as primary stakeholders. This needs to start first at the community level first, where the community members (mainly parents) understand the relevance of this idea, and this further not limited to education alone, but is taken forward to other child rights issues as well.

Once this premise is in place, the need to involve the children in decision making and monitoring of the policies will also gain momentum and will simultaneously be put into practice. The need for adopting child centered and child focused approaches has to be understood by the service providers as well, so that the policies impacting the children are formulated based on an informed understanding of the needs and concerns of the children.

Oxfam India supported SYM model actively seeks to engage children both within the boundaries of the school and as well as outside which results in increased and improved participation. This further results in in improved enrollment rates in schools. The model also demonstrates that interventions and activities should be based on quality and accurate ground level information. A point in case, is the district level sammelan of children in which a compiled fact sheet was prepared to draw attention of district administration towards the status of children’s education. However, simply monitoring and collecting information is not enough. Important findings and gaps from local activities should be taken forward to higher levels so that there can be some concrete action. For instance, SYM met with the Director of SSA, to follow up on applications that had been filed, on which action/decision is pending.

Finally to conclude, the education policies and provisions catering to children cannot not be ignorant to the needs and concerns of the very same children. SYM’s initiatives helps brings the limelight and importance to the children, the primary stakeholders. It gives them the space, confidence and voice to express their concerns and issues. It further ensures that their voice is heard so that it can impact the education policies and activities, making them sensitive to demands and challenges of children. Lastly, SYM not only educates and builds the capacity of the children regarding their rights and provisions, it also tries to equip them with skills of monitoring, advocating for changes in the system of education to cater to ground realities in the schools.

To sum up, the following are lessons in brief

- Children’s participation is imperative and indivisible part of development programmes and activities concerning children themselves
- In the programmes directly benefitting or impacting children participation should become non-negotiable.
- Children should be engaged as an important stakeholder in the entire decision making process.
- Children’s participation can help overcome barriers of caste, religion and ethnicity existing in the communities.
- Community members, primarily parents need to understand the relevance and importance of children’s participation
- Similarly, policy makers and implementers (government officials) need to ensure that the needs and concerns are appropriately addressed during the formulation and implementation of policies, programmes etc.

REFERENCE:
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This learning note is prepared based on Oxfam India’s partner SYM experience, processes and lessons learned by adopting child participation in its programmes and initiatives for wider sharing. It was documented by Ms. Shirin Naseem during August 2014 to October 2014. We would like to thank the entire Essential Services team and Oxfam India’s Education partners for their inputs given during the process of documentation.

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