



INTERNATIONAL
CHILD
PROTECTION
NETWORK
OF CANADA

FACILITATING CHILD PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION
OCTOBER 5-6, 2015
RYERSON UNIVERSITY, CANADA

Conference Executive Summary

Ryerson University and the International Child Protection Network of Canada (ICPNC) convened this international conference to address the relationship between child participation and child protection. Sixty scholars (faculty & students), young people, policymakers and practitioners working on issues related to international child protection, child rights, and children's participation gathered at this participatory, interactive event. The key goal was to identify and discuss the current gaps or issues that require priority in research and advocacy in order to support child participation in international child protection efforts. International child protection efforts aim to ensure that child rights are protected, while improving the quality of life and wellbeing of young people around the world. The conference used this broad working definition so that conclusions can be as applicable as possible to wide range of activities, organizations, geographic areas and populations of children. The conference agenda and videos of plenary presentations are available at: <http://icpnc.org/2015/11/10/facilitating-child-participation-in-child-protection-video-recording/> Conference papers and presentation files can be found at: <http://icpnc.org/publications-and-resources/conference-on-child-participation-and-child-protection-resources/> A special issue of the *International Journal of Human Rights* is planned for publication of full papers in the near future.

To support this process, a youth preparatory meeting was organized on October 4 and a follow-up planning meeting held on October 7, 2015. There are separate summary reports that have been developed to briefly describe these outcomes.

The conference reached the following general conclusions. Please see the full conference summary document for more details.

Definition of participation

- **Respect:** Recognizing the diversity among children and the ways they choose to participate
- **Power:** Acknowledging loci of power in children's lives and how this affects their participation

- **Process:** Identifying the factors necessary for participation to be complete and meaningful
- **Context:** Locating participation within the child's social, political, cultural, geographical, and personal realities

Ethical tensions

- **Individuality & collectivity:** Considering how the rights, roles, and best interests of the child and the caregivers/family can align, clash, and intersect.
- **Agency & responsibility:** Questioning what weight is given to the child's evolving capacity relative to the adult's duty of care.
- **Self-determination & legislative regulation:** Reconciling children's participation rights and how this informs what they want with legal frameworks designed to protect children from being forced into something they don't want.
- **Vulnerability & resilience:** Acknowledging that children in certain situations have certain needs without compartmentalizing them according to those needs.
- **Quantity & quality:** Providing an impactful quantity of services without sacrificing quality and individual-oriented attention.
- **Institutional knowledge & lived experience:** Exploring the applicability and utility of 'best practices' and evidence-based intervention to the daily lives of individuals and communities.
- **Pragmatism & idealism:** Navigating the fiscal and political demands of institutions while honouring the principles of children's rights.

Legal tensions

- **Macro vs. micro:** The effectiveness and desirability of international law affecting domestic law, as well as its sensitivity to regional variance and realities
- **On paper vs. in practice:** The enforceability and implementation fidelity of laws and standards
- **Top-down vs. bottom-up:** The ability of children to push back at adult power when confronted with punitive legislation, age-based criteria for legal competence, and lack of legal complaints mechanisms

Political tensions

- **National & international:** Resistance from national constituencies to the norms and ideology imposed by the international community.
- **Agendas & agency:** Conflict between institutional or political agendas and children's expressions of agency.
- **Shifts & shortfalls:** Lack of courage, political will, and accountability in defending child participation, along with shrinking spaces for civil society (including children) to participate

Practical tensions

- **Institutions:** money (donor dependency, short-term funding, competition for funding); time (lack of collective memory and continuity); human resources (staff turnover, experience of senior management, disciplinary background of workers in the field); organization (vision and leadership, bureaucracy, size and scale)
- **Resources:** conceptualization challenge (conveying the importance of participation and protection to a crisis-fatigued public); flow of funding (money for specific as opposed to systemic initiatives, with formerly reliable donors no longer available); structure of the sector (encroachment of the private sector, diffuse nature of the non-profit sector)
- **Societies, cultures, and attitudes:** colonialism (intergenerational trauma, paternalism, and destruction of local knowledge, but a desire to protect local culture and practices); globalization (primacy of economic indicators, widespread disenfranchisement, mass migration, but technology/social media as sites of resistance and change); gender (accepted notions of masculinity/femininity); race (indigenous and minority groups); generational transformation (role of religion, role of the 'patriarch,' role of the parent)
- **Tokenism:** remains the norm; inconsistently addressed in practice; dependent on how participation is defined
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** difficulty holding local governments to account; danger of reducing participation to its indicators; challenge of ensuring that child involvement is representative of different regions, ages, and identities; accepting monitoring and evaluation as an integral part of the participatory process
- **Safeguarding:** defining safeguarding; recognizing that for some children, not participating is the safest course of action; acknowledging the danger of re-traumatizing children through their participation; lack of education and training around safeguarding

Recommendations for action

1. Provide evidence on child participation
 - i. *Training:* Equip staff with a minimum set of skills (ongoing education) and tools (capacity-building) in order to gather the evidence.
 - ii. *Integrity:* Prioritize transparency, with all actors (especially children) involved in amassing information.
 - iii. *Flexibility:* Modify existing or create new frameworks to accommodate and embrace the diversity of evidence around child participation.
 - iv. *Innovation:* Pilot new approaches to data collection (e.g. social media).
 - v. *Scope:* Conduct longitudinal studies to determine whether interventions have lasting effects.
 - vi. *Accessibility:* Publish information that is understandable and interesting to people, including children. Facilitate information sharing across contexts (e.g. local and global, for-profit and non-profit).
 - vii. *Accountability:* Always having child-friendly versions of the work that is done (e.g. surveys, studies, events) and provide updates on developments.
2. Target global insecurity and inequality

- i. *Policy*: Provide feedback to governments on all findings around these issues and include ideas for solutions.
 - ii. *Prevention*: Invest more resources in exploring prevention issues.
 - iii. *Sustainable development*: Work together across sectors and organizations and support children in addressing sustainable development goals.
 - iv. *Hope*: Actively combat the culture of fear surrounding youth participation and protest. Provide examples of positive youth mobilization, showing the benefits of youth engagement in promoting policy change.
3. Create more child-friendly spaces
- i. *Holism*: Acknowledge the moral and spiritual aspects of childhood and children, which are often neglected.
 - ii. *Awareness*: Push for children's rights in the education system, where it can reach children and those who care and work for them.
 - iii. *Curiosity*: Nurture critical thinking, within organizations and the programs they run.
 - iv. *Collaboration*: Explore partnership opportunities. Make alliances not with just one organization, but with many.
4. Follow where children lead
- i. *Support*: Capitalize on what children are already doing. Recognize and nurture their leadership and mobilization.
 - ii. *Strength*: Move away from problem-oriented language and celebrate the capacity of children.
 - iii. *Relevance*: Stay on top of the trends and seize the opportunities that present themselves.
 - iv. *Risk*: Innovation is a step into the unknown and this entails risk. Show organizations and funders that risk is part of the process.