

Child Participation and Safeguarding Briefing Note

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Summary

One of the more significant unifying exercises addressed through the *Facilitating Child Participation in International Child Protection Conference*, which convened at Ryerson University from October 5th and 6th, 2015, was a discussion on the definition of child and youth participation in relation to the elaboration from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). Plenary presentations discussed ways that NGOs have incorporated children's participation in their activities. Following conversations about the definition of participation, plenary discussions delved into connecting children's rights approaches to advance child and youth participation in planning, resolutions to protection, and inadequacies in current models of safeguarding.

Issue

Current models of safeguarding are generally designed to keep children safe and protected within child protection. But these models do not accurately reflect the needs of all children and youth in all countries, and mobilizing children and youth to participate in their own protection may inadvertently put children and youth at risk. Furthermore, inexperienced and poorly trained field workers can cause harm, which directly contradicts the definition of safeguarding.

Background

As advocates and professionals in the international human rights development community with the closest relationships to children and youth, responsibility is often left in our hands to ensure the rights of children and youth are realized. It is through our interconnectedness with communities that we have impact and can create change with appropriate knowledge on issues that impact of the effectiveness of safe-guarding grounded in respect for children's rights.

Considerations

As one of the participants noted, children (and youth) are capable of mobilizing and aligning themselves on issues concerning their protection. Fifteen thousand child workers in Bolivia formed a union to protect themselves against harm and exploitation. Another participant, with 35 years experience in the field, described in an exploratory

essay included in the conference materials section that: “Not infrequently, their perspectives respond better to the specifics of their actual situation than do those of outside adults advocating the application of generic child protection policies and programs of action” (Myers, 2015).¹ Safeguarding children in communities means being equipped and present in child spaces, which are diverse in scope, quality, and possibility, as diverse as all the nations of the world. Child and youth protection workers must be willing to meet children and youth where they are to monitor safeguarding, and governments must be willing to hold agencies, businesses, organizations and communities accountable for providing the healthy development and wellbeing of their children. Field workers must balance engagement with appropriate expectations based on intimate knowledge of cultural and political contexts of the international communities.

Conclusion

The matter of importance is the implementation process. Keeping governments accountable to children and youth must ensure strategies involving children and youth who may otherwise feel they have no voice or impact as well as recognize where there are power imbalances between adults and children/youth. Advocates and agencies must work together, acting in their own communities and within the larger community of professionals to equip themselves with the skills necessary to create space for children and youth to empower themselves. They must create spaces here children and youth can participate in transparent processes that impact their safety and security planning. They must work with and advocate for, and with children by first listening to their ideas and concerns, and challenging existing frameworks that are not working for children and youth. Supporting children and youth by standing with them through challenges to ensure governments and power players adhere to mutually respectful interactions where children can be empowered by the communal effort with compassion and conviction within the system of protection.

Recommendations

1. Provide evidence on child participation: equip staff with opportunities for training and capacity building for collecting evidence; prioritize the transparency around all actors involved in the process; make necessary changes to existing frameworks to capture various experiences and child participation; stay open to new and changing ways of documenting experience and thought; fund long-term studies to ensure viability of programming/commitment; and ensure accessibility of information in reporting on efforts, especially to children.
2. Target global insecurity and inequality: ensure governments receive feedback and pressure as well as feasible solutions to issues encountered in the process;

¹ See https://icpnc.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/myers_childrens-right-to-defend-their-well-being-and-development.pdf

invest in solution focused approaches and prevention strategies; work with children in developing strategies around sustainable development goals; work to create space for children and youth to be empowered; and fight against increasing fear surrounding participation.

3. Create more child/youth friendly spaces: work to include children's rights in education where adults can engage them in the discourse; adults need to challenge their subconscious assumptions and judgments about children; acknowledge the spiritual and moral child in programs and services; recognize the importance of preparing children and youth for their engagement in adult style conference; and explore partnerships between organizations, academics, and governments.
4. Follow where children and youth lead: support child and youth efforts by nurturing their leadership and initiative; recognize the capacity of children and youth to engage and provide meaningful contributions; embrace new and trending ways children and youth are mobilizing and use the opportunities to communicate; and accept risk with the understanding that with change and innovation, there is uncertainty.
5. Partnership in assessing risks to child protection: equip children with skills and resources to identify risk, trauma, and to seek support and help when needed; support children and youth in determining what risks are necessary to take; provide measures and support to support children when there are negative consequences; and recognize that assessing and mitigating risk is both a short- and long-term undertaking because not all risks can be defined from the beginning of processes, thereby requiring follow up and monitoring.

If you are interested in learning more about the recommendations arising from conference discussions, please visit: <https://icpnc.org/publications-and-resources/conference-on-child-participation-and-child-protection-resources/> to access conference materials.