

THE WASHINGTON NETWORK ON
 WNCAC
CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

Children's Participation in Conflict
Meeting Notes, May 26th, 2005

The May meeting of the Washington Network on Children in Armed Conflict convened focused on children's role in the context of armed conflicts. The dialogue addressed the meanings of children's participation and its implications in programming. What is children's participation? How can children's involvement enhance programming? How is it done?

The conversation was framed by *Maury Mendenhall*, US Department of Labor and *Gillian Mann*, author of a range of publications on children's participation. Questions included: What is children's participation? How can children's involvement enhance programming? How is it done?

Discussion Points:

What is children and youth participation?

- From a programming perspective it is the process of involving children and youth in all the stages of development or peacebuilding programs (planning, design, implementation, evaluation ...etc)
- From a more practical perspective, it is addressing the issue of how children and youth are involved in the overall well-being of their community
- Although 'children's participation' usually refers to bringing young people into programming and community processes, we should also be concerned with children's participation IN the conflict

What are the benefits and values of involving children and youth in development programs and in peacebuilding initiatives?

- Makes for better, more creative and sustainable programs and it also makes for better citizens
- These programs are about harnessing children's power so it can be used for their own benefit, in terms of creating peace
 - Youth media is a great example of how children and youth's power can be useful in peacebuilding. Children and youth have used media in creative ways to create peace. They have creative ways of addressing issues adults may not know how to address
- Participation can also bridge gaps between generations. The process of involving children and youth in peacekeeping initiatives shows adults that they are capable of making big decision

- Initiatives involving children in youth, provide an important opportunity for children to form friendships and important relationships with other youth and adults.
- Children's participation is beneficial because it lead to more informed programming; children know better what they need in their lives
- These programs give children and youth a space to 'play' or hang out, which is important because many children and youth in theses situations say they have no time to relax otherwise
- Programs involving children's participation can be very beneficial with refugees; removing them from isolation, giving them a chance to speak their native language and share cultural traditions with other children and youth
- If we can give children choices and the power to make certain decisions, they can be more creative than adults

What are the risks involved in involving children and youth in development programs and in peacebuilding initiatives?

- One risk involved is putting children and youth in a position that they are cognitively not ready for.
- What if adult decision makers disagree with the decisions that kids have made?
- Some participation initiatives create false expectations among young people of the adults around them
- Without proper precautions, children can end up more vulnerable to violence and exploitation

How do we go about involving children and youth?

- Need to start with what young people are already doing
- Before trying to involve youth, it is important to investigate what children are already doing in the community
 - Many times youth are already organizing themselves, even though they might not call themselves an NGO
- It is essential that we trust youth and children's ability to perform
- It is important to clarify whether 'children's participation' is the end goal and objective or if it is a means for other objectives such as civic participation, cognitive development, and peace
 - 'children's participation' can address both internal benefits (for the children themselves) and external benefits (for the community at large)
- Children and youth should have an invested interest in the project as to ensure its continuation and sustainability
 - If children and youth have ownership of the project they can participate better
- Authenticity is key in involving youth
- Space issue: instead of bringing children and youth in to 'adult space' trying to talk to them and get involved in their own space
 - One good way to approach children in their spaces is through sports
- It is also important to involve children and youth in the research and planning stages of peace and development programs

Who decides which children should be involved in these programs? And why?

- Selecting the children and youth to be involved in these programs is a complicated issue, which may lead to conflict itself.
- Many times only the ‘visible’ children are selected. Usually boys. What about those who are not usually visible? How do we get to them?
- Sometimes only ex soldiers or combatants get selected to participate, leaving other children in youth feeling unprivileged because they were not once soldiers
- One way of deciding, is by letting the community select the children and youth who will participate.

Who are we referring to when we talk about children and youth participation?

- Although the term ‘children’ describes people under the age of eighteen, the category ‘youth’ can denote people between the ages of 15- 25 (or even older, depending on the cultural context).

Resources and Program Sharing

Potential Topics for next meeting:

- To discuss the distinction between humanitarian and human rights approaches
- To discuss monitoring and reporting with children in armed conflict

Resources:

The following are the relevant resources that were mentioned during the WNCAC meeting on May 26th, 2005:

- Participatory Learning and Action Notes - http://www.iied.org/sarl/pla_notes/index.html
- “Ethical Information Gathering with children” – Upcoming Publication by “Horizons”
- Canadian Agency for International Development Documents on Children’s Participation: http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/cida_ind.nsf/AllDocIds/29D734B7C1D0666585256F90005323AF?OpenDocument
- Swedish Save The Children online book shop <http://www1.rb.se/Shop/StartPage/StartPage.aspx?menu=1§ionId=822>
- “Children in Focus: A Manual for Participatory Research with Children” by Jo Boyden and Judith Ennew. Available for purchase at: <http://www1.rb.se/Shop/Products/Product.aspx~ItemId~317>
- Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict – www.watchlist.org
- **Piloting methods for the evaluation of psychosocial programme impact in eastern Sri Lanka** Report with J. Hart and M. Armstrong and A. Galappatti, for

USAID, Oxford, March 2004.

<http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/PDFs/rrpilotingmethods04.pdf>

- ***Making schools a safe horizon for girls: a training manual on preventing sexual violence against girls in schools*** Odhiambo, M.A.; Maganya, J. / *The CRADLE - the Children's Foundation (Child's Rights Advisory, Documentation and Legal Center)*, 2004 <http://www.eldis.org/education>

Upcoming Events:

"Eradicating the Use of Children as a Doctrine of War" with Lieutenant-General Roméo A. Dallaire, O.C., C.M.M., M.S.C, C.D. (Retired)

WHEN: TUESDAY, JUNE 7TH 2005, 6PM TO 8PM

WHAT: Presentation and Wine and Cheese Reception

WHERE: School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)
1740 Massachusetts Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

General Dallaire will discuss his recent research focusing on the real and perceived military advantages to the use of child soldiers from the perspectives of those who recruit them, as well as on opportunities for enhanced cooperation between military and humanitarian communities to end the use of child soldiers.

Please RSVP to Mikael Castro at mcastro@sfcg.org or (202) 777 2256.