

# ‘Talking does not bring change’: challenges facing child and youth participation in post-conflict contexts



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“We have great resilience to keep going despite everything that has happened. This gives us hope for the future. We have resilience inside. We do not want people to do things for us. We can do it ourselves.”

- How is participation conceived and by whom?
- Where is participatory language employed and how is this operationalized?
- What is participation seeking to achieve and for whom?

# Trauma versus Resiliency

- **Dominance of psychology: children affected by conflict are traumatized and healthy development is impeded.** (Dyregrov et al: 2002; Punamäki, 2002 ).
- **Children are resilient and contextual factors more important.** (Bracken, 2002; Jones, 2004; Summerfield, 1999)
- **How can participatory approaches strengthen agency and post-conflict transformation?**

# Overview

- **Children and Young People's understandings and experiences of participation.**
- **Case Study: Rwandan National Summit for Children and Young People.**
- **Case Study: CARE Rwanda's Nkundabana Initiative for Psychosocial Support (NIPS).**
- **Conclusion.**

# Children's understandings and experiences of participation

## ‘Performed Participation’

- Extraordinary to daily life.
- Consultation.
- Language of listening and being heard.

- **Consultation.**

**“There were workers who came and asked us if we had mosquito nets, if we had a radio, if we ate meat...”**

- **One-off event and lack of follow-up.**

**“They come, talk with us, leave, then we never hear from them again.”**

- **Scepticism.**

**“Are the UN people here to help us or for business?”**

- **Need for greater involvement.**

**“People should come to ask for our opinions. NGOs which assist children can come to consult us, we are ready to give our contribution of ideas.”**

# ‘Lived Participation’

- Rooted in the structures and activities of daily life.
- Ongoing series of supportive relationships.
- Means to access other rights.
- To be “like the other children.”

# National Summit for Children and Young People

- Language of rights and participation.

“Children are not beneficiaries but partners.”

“Speak up for yourselves, advocate for your rights. Don’t expect others to come and do it for you as they might not do.”

# National Summit for Children and Young People

- Language not matched by practice.

“We children who have our parents in prison, we do not like the Government of National Unity. We want to government to help us like the others.”

“Talking does not bring change.”

# National Summit for Children and Young People

- **Conception of participation.**

“To give children a voice is to respect children’s rights.”

- **Operationalization of participation.**

“We fear head teachers more than the army, police and parents. We want a free phone line to report what we see.”

# National Summit for Children and Young People

- Whose agenda?
  - “Children are the Rwanda of tomorrow.”
  - “You must be worthy of Rwanda.”
  - Nation building and patriotism.
- Agency.
  - Power-imbalance between bearers/holders.
  - Patriarchy and beneficence of the government.

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Community-based project for child/youth-headed households.
- Adults, children and the local authorities identify project participants.
- Children select a Nkundabana (mentor) from the community.
- Participants are visited by Nkundabana; receive advice and guidance on health, rights, education, and livelihoods; are placed in associations for social and economic support.

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Livestock, agricultural training and associations create livelihood security

**“We started an association of cultivators. We cultivate for each of us so that we have better production enough for our households and even take it to the market.”**

- Income-generating skills enable participants to plan for the future

**“I think in the coming years I will have a store because I have started preparing for it .”**

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Educational support more successful at primary rather than secondary level and not just economic barriers.

“My problem is that when I go to school I don’t have food, I need to miss school and go cultivate so that I have food. You understand that this prevents me from following my studies. I think if I had someone help me to find food I would study better.”

“There are children who quit school because they didn’t have anyone to pay for their school. We wish that they [CARE] pay for their education because it is important.”

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Other unmet needs include shelter and health insurance. Resentment caused by selective distribution.

“They [CARE] promised me to help me build my roof but until now they didn’t.”

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Relationships.
  - With peers

**“I play ball with children of my age, we walk around together, sit together and talk; we even lend each other money.”**

- Within the household

**“We are now patient with those we live with, so when a child makes a mistake you don’t beat him up like a cow.”**

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Relationships.
  - With Nkundabana

**“I can’t get words of expressing how our relationship is, because we are very free with them. When we have any problem we tell them, we are free with each other.”**

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Relationships with the community.
- Integration

“They [children with parents] have started letting us visit them, we are the same and we even choose friends among them.”

- Engaging the community changes attitudes and reduces resentment

“Initially people wanted integration of their children in the programme. But when they got explanations, they understood that the project concerned only vulnerable children.”  
(Nkundabana)

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Importance of context and dealing with socio-political issues at this level.

“I realized that I was misinformed because I wasn’t considering the children of imprisoned parents as needy ones. I only considered orphans of genocide the needy children. Later on I came to understand that they also need help. These days I do help them where possible like providing some food for imprisoned parents.”

( Nkundabana)

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Community problems remain.

“Some people say that the Nkundabana’ children are rich—they are given all things. In brief, we notice a kind of jealousy.”  
(Nkundabana)

- Unintended consequences.

“Some children who have parents wish they were orphans because they find that we are doing better than them and their parents don’t do anything for them.”

# CARE Rwanda: NIPS

- Conceptualization: participation grounded in community structures and relationships to challenge obstacles to rights realisation.
- Implementation: bottom-up, participatory approach. Participation of entire community avoids exacerbating political tensions.
- Agenda and Agency: feedback mechanisms and involvement in some decision-making BUT
- Lack of participation in resource allocation creates new tensions.

# Conclusion

- ‘Lived participation’ used to access other rights and to build protective and reciprocal relationships.
- Bottom-up and focused on the child-in-community not in isolation.
- How to build on what is already being done/exists?

- ‘Performed participation’ can provide a platform but should be rooted in daily life.
- Participation cannot exclude or act as a substitute for politics.
- Are other discourses/practices exclusive to rights/participation or can they enrich our understanding?
- Awareness of how discourses being used which undermine the principles of rights and participation.
- How can participatory language and practice be reclaimed?

- NGOs should pay the same amount of attention to internal participation as external.
- Participation is not an end in it itself and should not be supported uncritically.
- For children and young people meaningful participation is the ability to participate in daily life.