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Action research exploring information communication technologies (ICT) and child protection in Thailand

Philip H. Cook, Cheryl Heykoop, Athapol Anuntavoraskul, and Jutarat Vibulphol

Traditional approaches to protecting children are insufficient to meet the complex issues they now face, and inter-sectoral, child-centred strategies are needed. Addressing this, the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) developed the Circle of Rights (COR), a participatory action research approach to involve children in ‘bottom-up’ protection work. This paper describes COR in Thailand through the Child Protection Partnership (CPP), a project focused on ICT child protection. Children, youth and adults in four Thai communities collaborated in co-creating integrated strategies to address ICT and child protection. The paper describes the process and actions resulting from this child-centred partnership.

Recherche-action portant sur les technologies d’information et de communication pour l’information (TIC) et la protection de l’enfance en Thaïlande

Les approches traditionnelles de la protection de l’enfance ne sont pas suffisantes pour répondre aux questions désormais en présence et ce sont des stratégies intersectorielles et centrées sur l’enfant qui sont nécessaires. Pour remédier à ce problème, l’Institut international pour les droits et de développement de l’enfant (International Institute for Child Rights and Development - IICRD) a mis au point le Cercle des droits (Circle of Rights - COR), une approche participative basée sur la recherche-action afin de faire participer les enfants au travail de protection « ascendant ». Cet article décrit le COR en Thaïlande à travers le Partenariat pour la protection de l’enfance (Child Protection Partnership - CPP), un projet portant sur la protection de l’enfance dans le contexte des TIC. Les enfants, les jeunes et les adultes de quatre communautés thaïlandaises ont collaboré pour créer ensemble des stratégies intégrées afin d’aborder les questions liées aux TIC et à la protection de l’enfance. Cet article décrit le processus et les actions découlant de ce partenariat centré sur l’enfant.

Pesquisa de ação explorando tecnologias de comunicação da informação (ICT) e proteção infantil na Tailândia

Pesquisas tradicionais de proteção às crianças são insuficientes para tratar das questões complexas por elas enfrentadas atualmente, sendo necessárias estratégias intersetoriais, centradas nas crianças. Abordando isto, o Instituto Internacional para Direitos da Criança e Desenvolvimento (IICRD) desenvolveu o Círculo de Direitos (COR), uma abordagem de pesquisa de ação participativa para envolver crianças no trabalho de proteção de “baixo para cima”. Este artigo
descreve o COR na Tailândia por meio da Parceria de Proteção Infantil (CPP), um projeto concentrado na proteção infantil da ICT. Crianças, jovens e adultos em quatro comunidades tailandesas colaboraram na criação conjunta de estratégias integradas para abordar a ICT e a proteção infantil. O artigo descreve o processo e as ações resultantes desta parceria centrada na criança.

La investigación-acción sobre las tecnologías de información y comunicación (TIC) y la protección de la niñez en Tailandia

Los métodos tradicionales que se utilizan para proteger a los niños y niñas son insuficientes para enfrentar los complejos problemas de la actualidad; se requieren estrategias intersectoriales y centradas en la niñez. Para enfrentar esta problemática, el Instituto Internacional para los Derechos del Niño y el Desarrollo creó el Círculo de Derechos (CdD), un método participativo de investigación-acción en el que los niños y niñas participan “desde la base” en acciones encaminadas a su protección. Este ensayo describe un CdD que creó la Alianza para la Protección de la Niñez en Tailandia, un proyecto que se centra en la protección de la niñez a través de las TIC. Los niños, niñas, jóvenes y adultos de cuatro comunidades tailandesas se unieron para diseñar conjuntamente varias estrategias que integran la protección de la niñez y las TIC. Este ensayo describe el proceso y los resultados de esta alianza centrada en la niñez.

KEY WORDS: Gender and diversity; Technology; Rights; Methods; East Asia

Introduction

A number of global changes, including the growth of information and communications technologies (ICT), and shifting demographics (aging populations in the Global North and youthful demographics in the Global South) implicate children and childhood in multiple and important ways (Lynch 2010). Responding to these global changes presents both challenges and opportunities to child protection – a relatively youthful social service sector compared with say health or education. The challenge of devising effective protection services is especially acute where new kinds of problems for children and youth arise as a result of evolving ICT. The following paper describes a participatory research journey exploring ICT-enabled child protection in Thailand. Multiple perspectives from children and youth and other adult stakeholders in four Thai regions weave different themes as a complex narrative about the impact of ICT on children and the ways various social sectors can respond to threats arising from ICT. The paper also charts the emerging opportunities for children and youth to be agents of change in their own protection and in the creation of new models of child protection through a participatory process of critical reflection and engagement.

The Asian region has the most rapidly growing population of ICT users in the world, most of whom are young people between the ages of 14 and 25. In the last ten years, Thailand has seen staggering ICT user growth of 660 per cent, with the rate rising from two to 17 million people. As a youthful country, this has important implications for the ways children and youth will shape the future of Thai social, economic and political systems (Internetworldstats.com 2011).

ICT is an umbrella term including any communication devices or applications: radio, television, mobile phones, computer, hardware and software, satellite systems, and services and applications related to them such as online chatting, and social networking (IICRD 2011). These technologies are constantly evolving, merging, and creating new hybrids and applications; for example mobile phones, Internet, video conferencing, and social networking are all being applied together in the evolution of smart phones.
According to ECPAT (2008), an international network of organisations and individuals that brings together research and advocacy to eliminate the commercial sexual exploitation of children, one of the fastest growth areas in ICT use is online pornography, including the phenomena of online paedophilia and the sexual abuse of children. Another current agent of great change and a fast growth area of ICT use is social networking amongst young people. Young people are therefore not simply victims in the ICT world. Many new ICT technologies are being developed by adolescents and youth, and young people are themselves transforming the ways in which ICT is defining the social, commercial, and political facets of human connectivity. This ranges from the mundane world of collective shopping ‘groupons’, through the creation of unique online identities and personal webs of relationships, to well-orchestrated populist social network movements aiming to overthrow non-democratic governments in the Middle East and other regions of the world.

The Child Protection Partnership (CPP)

To address these issues and develop innovative systems of social support, the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) created the Child Protection Partnership (CPP). This global research initiative attempts to understand the unique and emerging threats posed by ICT sexual exploitation; it also examines how young people are involved in finding solutions to these risks and in applying the results of this research to strengthen social protection systems.

The goal of CPP is to reduce, and where possible eliminate, ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation by building on good practices and technology across public and private sectors. CPP has three entry points to address the issue:

- Equip law enforcement, government, and other supporting bodies or organisations better to address ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation.
- Connect vulnerable children (male and female) to protective mechanisms and services that prevent and address ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation.
- Foster a coordinated systems approach amongst stakeholders, supported by CPP to prevent and address ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation.

For CPP to succeed in strengthening child protection systems, interventions at all these entry points depend on adequate consultation and cooperation with the young persons involved. CPP encourages children to protect themselves and to contribute to peer prevention and protection through working with bodies such as governments, policymakers, police, owners of Internet cafés, and non-governmental organisations. To do this, CPP partners work with young people to build on their strengths and expertise in ICT child protection.

To understand the complexity of ICT and child protection, and develop contextualised solutions in local Thai contexts, the CPP team believed that direct engagement with children was necessary. This type of engagement required providing children with opportunities to reflect upon the problems facing them and develop viable solutions, and would also need to connect children to a broad range of stakeholders to help address children’s concerns. Accordingly, a child-centred methodology developed by IICRD called ‘The Circle of Rights’ was applied, in which the foundations of children’s human rights and community engagement with children are integral.

The Circle of Rights (COR): intentional planning in social change

Adopted in 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) represents the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, and has been adopted by every country except the United States of America and Somalia. The UNCRC articulates the minimum legal and ethical commitments and standards for optimal child development, and provides a framework...
ICT and child protection in Thailand

for accountability and collective action to advance the human rights of all children. Despite widespread legislative and policy commitments, research suggests actions to implement the UNCRC still fail to realise the rights of many children in their day-to-day lives. Critics argue that these shortcomings result from the application of generic, imposed, or Western-centric approaches, affording limited regard to local social and cultural contexts and conceptualisations of children and childhood. Rather such critics call for innovative and creative inter-sectoral approaches to contextualise the principles of the UNCRC in ways that synchronise with the unique and changing realities of children, families, and communities, and demonstrate positive empirical change in the context of children’s lives (Bissell et al. 2008).

To help ground children’s rights locally and within the context of children’s day-to-day lives, IICRD, a hybrid academic/non-governmental organisation located at the University of Victoria, Canada, has worked over the last 16 years to develop the Circle of Rights process (COR). This child-centred, participatory, action-oriented research process begins with children’s perspectives and helps communities to build from local wisdom and community strengths to develop innovative and contextualised strategies to support positive social change for children reflecting the principles of the UNCRC.

The metaphor of a young fern growing is used to describe the COR research process and also represent the strength-based, iterative learning-action process embedded within the four distinct phases of COR: Map; Engage; Plan; and Create.

The COR methodology has been adapted and applied around the globe to tackle a variety of complex challenges in relation to child rights and protection, including HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, extreme poverty, the rights of indigenous children and their communities, violence and conflict, and the development of contextualised child protection and governance systems. While the principles of COR have remained constant, the practice of COR has reflexively evolved to integrate lessons learnt through application. In this paper we demonstrate the COR methodology by looking at its application in Thailand through CPP.

Methodology

Community partners

To better understand the issue of ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation in Thailand, CPP worked through local partners in three initial pilot communities:

1. Human Development Foundation and Mercy Centre in Klong Toey, a slum area in Bangkok
2. Plan Thailand International in Baan Nato, a community bordering Burma in the Province of Chiang Rai
3. We Peace in Grongpinung, a community affected by the conflict in the Yala Province in Thailand’s Deep South

In the later stages, CPP also engaged with children in Pattaya, a community near Bangkok and one of Thailand’s most notorious centres of commercial sex tourism. At a national level, there was collaboration with three key partners: the Faculty of Education of Chulalongkorn University, Plan Thailand International, and Fight Against Child Exploitation (FACE).

Participant selection

Participant selection was purposive, including factors of age, gender, populations at risk, and accessibility to ICT. While efforts were made to ensure diverse representation across these factors, sampling was also partially based for convenience on pre-existing relationships with...
local partners, and willingness to participate in the research. In total, 108 children and young people participated, including 27 children from Klong Toey (19 boys, 18 girls, aged 11–16 years); 51 children from Baan Nato (16 boys, 35 girls, aged 13–19); 30 children from Grongpinung (17 boys, 13 girls, aged 10–12). Later, work in these three communities was supplemented with focused activities in Pattaya. Adults from these communities also participated, including parents, officials in local government and law enforcement, and members of broader civil society.

The findings do not represent the views of all young people living in Thailand or even an accurate cross section. Rather, the intention is to bring together the voices and experiences of a sample of children, their communities, and key child protection partners (government, law enforcement, NGOs) to shed light on their experiences and perspectives of interaction in their community between child protection and ICT. A secondary purpose is to use this information to inform inter-sectoral and collective action to strengthen accountability and foster new approaches to child protection. The children participating in this process were generally local young people aged 12–18 who were already engaged in ongoing community activities organised by the host organisations.

**Map phase**

The first step in COR involved locating the issue of ICT-enabled child protection within the national Thai context of child rights. This includes mapping the child rights mandate (legislation, regulation and policies), inter-sectoral actors (duty-bearers and systems related to child rights and protection), and mechanisms (strategies, interventions, good practices and gaps) related to ICT and child protection. A variety of activities were used including: a desk review to identify relevant laws, policies and programmes addressing ICT and child protection, and key informant interviews to identify national mandates, inter-sector stakeholders and collaborations, and mechanisms (projects and innovations) related to ICT and child protection.

For this study the national child rights mandate included a review of Thailand’s Constitution, the Child Protection Act, the Anti-Human Trafficking in Persons Act, the Penal Code, the Computer Crime Act, and the Decentralization Act. While some of these legal instruments provide broad protection such as the right of children to be protected from violence and unfair treatment, there is virtually no reference to ICT or related issues such as child pornography. However, some strengths were identified that may be built upon, such as provision to suppress dissemination of pornographic material (Computer Crime Act 2007).

The main finding of the Map phase was that, while Thailand has strong child protection laws and systems, the laws give limited focus to ICT and the corresponding implications on child protection. In addition, the desk review highlighted that the inter-sectoral committees established under the Child Protection Act provide a unique opportunity to inform policy development and adopt innovative inter-sectoral strategies to address ICT-enabled child protection and prevention of child abuse. However, there remained a lack of clarity with regards to the agencies responsible for establishing and enforcing procedures and operations in game shops and internet cafés, and this lack of clarity may present a challenge.

In regards to the policing policies relevant to ICT-enabled child protection, the mapping revealed that Thailand’s newly established Crime Suppression Division (2009) is responsible for implementing the Computer Crime Act. Unfortunately, this division of the Royal Thai Police (RTP) has received limited training and capacity building on child protection and its relationship to ICT beyond paedophilia.
Finally, the mapping highlighted an opportunity to strengthen the role the wider community plays in addressing ICT-enabled child protection. Under the Decentralization Act, the Department of Local Administration (DLA) holds responsibility for the creation of community action plans for child and youth, and is also responsible for local policing, education and youth engagement through the establishment of a local youth council (Varanyuwatana 2009). This presents a unique chance to work with the DLA to develop innovative, inter-sectoral, youth-led solutions at the community level.

Engage phase

With the Map phase complete, CPP partners began the Engage phase of COR through engaging with children, their communities, and child protection system stakeholders to understand perspectives on ICT and child protection, and to identify the associated challenges and opportunities. Specifically, the Engage phase sought to understand the perspectives of children and other stakeholders including families, community leaders, law enforcement officers, governments, and child protection organisations.

Activities started with collective, playful, trust building, and individual exploration activities; this was a first step to create more open and critically reflective dialogue with children. These activities later served as a platform for understanding the issues from the various perspectives.

Activities were organised in a layered, progressive manner, with each activity building from the previous one, with an increasing depth of inquiry on critical ICT risk and protection issues. These sessions began by creating a safe place for explaining the purpose of the research with children and for young people to share their personal experience with facilitators; specifically, the sessions allowed children to explore their inner worlds through their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about themselves and their interaction with others. Consideration was then given to children’s outer worlds. These activities explored young people’s understandings of the world around them and how they considered community (family, friends, people in community, culture and traditions) and institutional relationships (with schools, organisations, and government) within their social and physical environments (including places they go to, people they see, activities they do). Next was an exploration of children’s individual and collective interactions with diverse aspects of ICT, including mobile phones, computers, video, and the Internet. In all activities, an emphasis is placed on safety, imagination, critical inquiry, and mindful, insightful, action-oriented reflection and discussion.

Understanding children’s lived realities of ICT

This section outlines key themes that emerged from the Engage phase with children and youth from Klong Toey, Baan Nato, and Grongpinung, and youth in Pattaya.

Limited capacity of adults to provide ICT advice and safeguards

While the children identified the importance of receiving advice from adults in their lives, it became evident through the conversations that this is challenging in the context of ICT, where children, not adults, are often the experts. Children reported that many of their parents or guardians do not understand how to use ICT and do not monitor children’s usage; it is therefore difficult for parents and adults in the community to provide proper guidance on safe ICT use. Schools are more aware of ICT benefits and risks, yet the implementation of safeguards to protect children remains limited. For example:
At school the computer room is open from 8 am to 8 pm. But we are not allowed to chat, to watch clips, to play games, to watch movie stars’ pictures. Everyone has a password to use computers. If someone sees things that they are not supposed to, teachers will know. (14-year-old boy, Baan Nato)

Yet during focus-group discussions, these children and youth also indicated that the school does not have a programme to block inappropriate sites and that children and youth can find (either intentionally or accidentally) inappropriate clips, games, and images.

In some situations, safeguards exist to help keep children safe in Internet cafés and game shops. In Pattaya, regulations prohibit children from entering such establishments when wearing their school uniforms; the same regulations also identify hours when children are permitted to use the cafés. Yet, according to children and community police, these regulations are rarely enforced and also easy to avoid. For example, one child described how he changes his shirt before he enters the café. Children and young people also explained that the café and shop owners want their business and may turn a blind eye should someone under-age enter the shop. One disturbing Internet café trend mentioned in the Pattaya case study was the phenomenon of school-aged girls being encouraged to wear their school uniforms when using the cafés, in order to entice older foreign tourists with a sexual appetite for school-aged girls to use the cafés at the same time.

**Mobile phones**

Through the ICT mapping activity, children explained that mobile phones can be used in many ways, including:

- staying connected to friends and family
- taking pictures and recording video clips
- playing music and games
- having access to GPS locators or an alarm clock
- most important, to connect to the Internet.

Mobile phones were also being used to record and distribute graphic sexual or violent images, which can be used innocently or with intention to harm other children. Conversely, mobile phones were frequently used as a protective mechanism to call for help or to warn others of danger.

Mobile phones are the most accessible form of ICT for children. All children in Klong Toey have access to mobile phones, with 17 of the 28 COR participants owning their own. Even in remote Baan Nato, 20 of the 45 participating children either own or have access to mobile phones. Children and youth primarily use them to communicate with family and friends and to discuss any problems they may be facing.

* I use it [mobile phone] to receive calls from my sisters and my neighbours; I use it to call my Mom and sister; I talk with friends on the weekends (13-year-old girl, Baan Nato)

Furthermore, mobile phones help foster a sense of belonging and identity amongst peer groups, reflecting a child’s social status:

* I want someone to ask for my mobile phone number so other people will see me as important. (14-year-old girl Klong Toey)

A child living in a poor community may have difficulty in accessing or using a mobile phone. Children in Klong Toey and Pattaya spoke of the various ways they can obtain mobile phones, including through drug dealing, stealing, and exchanging sexual favours. One community facil-
itor described how one young girl exchanged sex for money to buy a mobile phone, and how another young man steals money to buy phone credit and play online games. While this information is anecdotal, the information shared in confidence with the trusted key informant reveals a theme that emerged in other key informant interviews, especially in the larger urban centres of Bangkok and Pattaya. It is clear that access to ICT comes at a significant personal and social cost for some, and issues of ICT and child protection cannot be considered as separate from the broader issues of poverty.

In the context of violence in Thailand’s southern insurgency, mobile phones can also be a particularly important protective tool for a child. For instance, one young woman described an incident in which a young boy was in his room and heard gun shots and the screams of his parents as they were shot. With his mobile phone he was able to call the police. The young woman suggested:

_Had it not of been for the mobile phone call the boy would have been killed._ (17-year-old girl, Grongpinung)

Another young woman, who had lost all her siblings in the conflict, reflected on how important ICT has been in her life:

_I survive because of my mobile phone. My family is all dead. When anything happens, I can survive because of my mobile phone. I can call the soldiers._ (18-year-old girl, Grongpinung)

Yet mobile phones can also pose considerable threats for children in their communities. The young women we spoke to in Grongpinung described how mobile phones are sometimes used to activate bombs by youth extremists. They also described how GPS applications can be used by authorities to track people.

**ICT and adolescent sexuality**

One of the ways children and youth explore sexuality and personal relationships is to engage in acts of ‘sexting’ (sexualised texting). This involves sending sexually explicit text messages or photographs to ICT users, primarily through mobile phones.

According to the participating children and young people, sexting is commonplace. In their opinion, sexting can boost self-esteem and it can feel good to flirt with others. For instance, sending an image of oneself naked can illicit praise or compliments, or can simply show that you care for someone. Young people, however, also talked about the negative implications of sexting and discussed what can happen when these sexual images get into the wrong hands. For instance, young people from Klong Toey explained that if a girl breaks up with her boyfriend, he can send the image to others. Or other people can record images and video clips and disseminate them widely without the permission of those involved, leading to deep personal shame and humiliation.

Mobile phones are now equipped with an array of tools to capture video clips and images, and children and young people use these tools widely to document their lives and share with others. Unfortunately, these images can also violate privacy in ways that may be detrimental to the lives of children. We heard many stories from young people to this effect, where sexual images were recorded and widely distributed. Various perspectives on this issue included:

_I once received a video of a student being raped and the clip was transferred to other friends._ (15-year-old boy, Klong Toey)

_There was girl in sixth grade having sex with a secondary school student in the park. It was_
recorded and was sent to other students. When the school found out the girl was expelled. They said that she was giving the school a bad reputation. I knew that girl. (15-year-old girl, Klong Toey)

A ten-year-old girl had sex with a twelve-year-old boy. A friend recorded it and sent it to his friends. It was spread throughout the village, and the girl's dad saw the recording. The father was angry but what could he do? When the child was asked about the event by the supporting organisation, she said it did not matter. She had been in similar circumstances before where sexual images of her had been circulated. She said, ‘It is just is how it is.’ (14-year-old girl, Grongpinung)

The importance of safe, creative and affordable online access

The importance of feeling safe in ICT spaces was a common theme, and children and youth reiterated their desire for a safe place to access the Internet. This value was shared generally by all children across the Thai sites and was captured in the following quote from Pattaya.

We want to be able to access Internet in a place where we feel safe. We want a place that is inexpensive and where we don’t have to see pornographic images. (14-year-old girl, Pattaya)

There was some variation in the type of safety being sought by the young people participating in the study, with a greater value being placed on safety from community conflict and violence in the Deep South, safety from pornography being highlighted in Pattaya and Bangkok, while in the North safety was more generally defined in regards to a broader cross section of issues including violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Unfortunately, many of the children and youth we spoke with across Thailand are unable to access computers or the Internet at home or at school and rely on community game internet shops, where governing laws are often scarce or non-existent; many shops are not registered. Children in Klong Toey and Pattaya talked extensively about the challenges of accessing safe, creative, and affordable Internet and gaming shops, and a variety of other child protection concerns. They talked about how some game shops are used to trade drugs and how they are surrounded by adults accessing pornographic images or chats:

There is a man who sits at the back of the Internet café and chats through a webcam with nude women. (15-year-old boy, Klong Toey)

Children described how shop owners shared pornographic images with them and encouraged them to chat with strangers. They also talked about how owners of game shops use promotions or incentives to encourage or lure young people into particular shops (such as ‘buy two hours and get one free’, ‘free food and drink if you play all day’, or ‘bring a friend and you can play for free’).

The impact on children and of Internet pornography and violence

Young people participating in the Circle of Rights process eloquently described how ICT can serve as a tool to expose children and youth to social influences for which they may not be prepared. In this emerging online environment children may be senders, receivers, victims, or active perpetrators of ICT-related sexual and violent acts. Several other examples were raised by law enforcement personnel, and these are identified in the next section.
Children in Klong Toey talked about the widespread distribution of pornographic images and clips. This phenomenon is so widespread that they described how amongst younger children this is now becoming a normalised aspect of their lives. According to the facilitator, the children and youth frequently talked about pornographic clips:

*They [porn clips] were the first thing children mentioned, and they [the children] described how they use mobile phones to watch porn clips and transfer these clips to friends.* (Adult facilitator, Klong Toey)

Another young person described how, while she was recently online, someone had wanted to chat with her:

*Last week I was using MSN. A guy said he was from Yala and wanted to talk to me. I said I didn’t have a camera, but I accepted access to his camera. When I saw his video stream it was his penis on line. He was proposing to have sex. He was much younger than me. I threatened to call the Ministry of Culture. He left.* (16-year-old girl, Grongpinung)

In conflict, ICT can also help normalise violence and violent behaviour. Young women from the Deep South described an instance where the beheading of a soldier was recorded on Bluetooth,¹ and the video was widely disseminated.

*It [the recording] was so easy to find. It makes violence normal.* (15-year-old girl, Grongpinung)

Children are often seen re-enacting violent events, such as killings, beheadings, and shootings in their games and other peer-related social activities. According to one young woman:

*Children are taking this [violence] all in. Children are seeing soldiers using guns. It is influencing the way they behave, and it is even worse when children have no guidance from parents.* (15-year-old girl, Grongpinung)

*They often take pictures of soldiers carrying guns. It makes them feel safe and secure.* (14-year-old girl, Grongpinung)

In conflict, ICT can save, replicate, and disseminate violent images and may further contribute to a further normalisation of violence in communities.

The complexities and opportunities of ICT for young people

It is clear that the interface between children, youth and technology is complex and goes beyond the boundaries of a child protection paradigm focusing solely on risk and protection. Much of the research took place against the backdrop of the Thai political struggle between the ‘red’ (generally in Northern Thai poor regions demanding greater democratisation) and ‘yellow’ (urban-based monarchist) movements, in which many young people were actively involved, using the Internet to express their social and political views.

Many of the focus-group collective conversations also addressed areas where young people felt a need to bridge the best of traditional Thai wisdom and cultural values (such as the concept of *Samakhi*, or collective unity) with the best of modern laws, protective agencies, and youth participation.

Plan and create phases

The Plan and Create phases of COR provided opportunities for children, communities, and implementing organisations to review the results of the Engage phase and begin establishing
priorities, ideas, and strategies for community action related to ICT and child protection. The Plan phase identified key themes and preliminary strategies with children and adult stakeholders, and the Create phase provided a forum in which children and communities could provide input on tangible actions to strengthen child protection and other government and non-governmental systems.

A central aspect of the Plan and Create phases was the creation of negotiated spaces, or opportunities for critical reflection amongst children and adults, on themes emerging from the Engage phase of the Circle of Rights. A key aspect of the facilitation of these discussions is an examination of the roles of government and non-governmental agencies, duty bearers, family and community stakeholders, and children in creating a stronger child rights environment, part of which involves in-depth reflection on the issues raised by children and an identification of the responsible organisations and government departments.

Activities in the Plan and Create phases included a variety of participatory reflective planning tools. One example is the creation of Strength and Challenge charts where participants organise themes identified in the engage activities into ‘strengths’, ‘challenges’, or a ‘grey zone’. The grey zone represents things that could be both a strength and a challenge (for example, sexting can strengthen a positive sexual identity but can also harm that identity when information is shared without that person’s permission). Another activity involved creating a ‘Strategy Tree’, where children were encouraged to identify and reflect on a key challenge, and identify the root causes of the challenge as well as some possible solutions or strategies. This activity also encouraged children to be reflexive and action-oriented in their thinking, for example, they considered how strengths outlined in the engage phase could be used to design solutions or strategies. Once action plans were identified with children and youth, community consultations were then hosted to explore the action plans developed, to establish inter-sectoral round tables, and to bring together children and their communities with local government and NGO representatives.

**Child and youth priorities and proposed strategies**

While the ICT landscape is quite different in each context, children in all four communities identified educational issues related to ICT and child protection as a key priority for the development of their action plans, reiterating a need to be better equipped and informed about safe use. In Baan Nato, children indicated that because ICT access is just becoming accessible, they have a particular need to better understand the benefits and risks of ICT so they can protect themselves when new threats emerge. In Pattaya and Klong Toey, where access to ICT is far more pervasive, children identified a need and desire to use the information gained during their involvement in CPP to share information on benefits and risks of ICT with others. This action idea was subsequently taken up by Plan International Thailand, IICRD, and the Thai Ministry of Education, creating and piloting a high-school curriculum on the safe and creative use of ICT.

Children in Pattaya also proposed ideas for action, specifically addressing the local threats of commercial sex tourism and other forms of abuse, and in the Deep South young people wanted better school-based education on self-protection from violence. Other actions emerging from the COR included: strengthening youth social networking with out-of-school young people for self-protection – which is being addressed by Plan International in partnership with the Mekong Youth Net, a youth-led network of NGOs in the Greater Mekong sub-region that is working on issues of self-protection from sex trafficking; and youth media coalitions in the Deep South. The final action plan that was created from the COR process was a partnership between youths and adults in Klong Toey and Pattaya, focusing on developing greater
cooperation between community police, children, and game-shop owners in order to create a ‘Community Code of Conduct for the Safe Gaming and ICT Centres’. One unintended early consequence of this action is that Plan International has also worked with some of these community game centres to create community-based ICT hubs for broader family use, including special programmes for young mothers to access current information on pre- and post-natal care.

Finally, a national outcome of the CPP process was the creation of an inter-sectoral committee on child protection and ICT, chaired by the National Institute for Child and Family Development at Mahidol University. This committee currently reports to the national child protection committee and is providing input on legislative and policy reform.

Conclusion

The Thai CPP experience underscores the complexity of understanding and responding to emerging threats to children in ways that both meet the changing reality of children in the world and develop systems of support that are responsive to context. The COR process was clearly limited in scale and time span. Neither are the findings representative of Thailand’s complexity as a country, nor can the emergent actions speak to the challenges of long-term sustainability of their impact on children and their protection. The COR process does, however, point to a
promising direction in regards to bottom-up approaches to the implementation of the UNCRC in ways that involve children in not only defining problems, but also identifying local and collective assets that can be built upon to create more responsive solutions.

A summary of key areas where COR can assist in strengthening child protection systems includes:

1. understanding the existing child protection context and identifying opportunities for influencing legislative and policy frameworks
2. developing family, community or school-based activities that give visibility and voice to children and young people, and highlight their unique experiences with, and perspectives on, child protection
3. creating negotiated community social and conceptual spaces for shared understanding and critical reflection around identified child protection concerns
4. supporting informed collective action and social innovation

While the COR process can assist in strengthening child protection systems themselves, the participatory, inclusive, and action-oriented nature of COR can also impact directly on children, communities, organisations, and other partners involved. For example COR may assist young people, and other stakeholders, to recognise the value and importance of their unique perspectives, fostering more engaged citizens at the community level. Additionally, the information harvested through COR can assist organisations to improve their own organisational programmes and practices, and strive to adopt the principles embedded in the COR process in their day-to-day lives.

Finally, while the mapping information gathered in this research speaks to the many challenges and gaps in the current legislative and policy environment on issues like ICT and child protection, the data gathered in the COR Thai process and subsequent policy round tables provide a platform upon which broad-based social protection policy can be created with children playing a meaningful role.

Note
1. Bluetooth wireless technology is built into electronic gadgets and lets you talk and share information such as voice, music, and videos, wirelessly (www.bluetooth.com).

References

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