Children’s Participation and International Development: Attending to the Political

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Abstract
Since the early 1990s participation has grown to become a key notion amongst child-focused international and intergovernmental development organisations. By means of participatory projects such bodies commonly seek to achieve transformation of children’s lives. While considerable consideration has been given to the technical, institutional and attitudinal challenges to achievement of this goal, far less attention has been paid to the political context in which such transformation is sought. Drawing upon the emerging critique of (adult) participatory development, this article seeks to illustrate the inherent limitations of child participation resulting from the failure to confront the workings of power associated with capitalist expansion. It argues that societal change leading to the realisation of the rights of impoverished and marginalised children requires greater political will and new forms of alliance amongst international child-focused development organisations.

Keywords
politics; localism; recognition; neo-liberalism; transformation; children’s rights

Introduction
Since the late 1970s, the notion of participation has become increasingly central to development practice and discourse to the point where it is now, arguably, the defining feature of a ‘new orthodoxy’ (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). For some, participation is a means either to ensure the greater relevance, efficiency and impact of development projects or to achieve democratic and inclusive processes of governance. For others, it is an end in itself: through the processes understood as participatory practice, the poor and marginalised acquire influence, skills, knowledge, networks and experience that they can use to improve their lives. Overall, participation is conceptualised as ‘empowering’, oriented towards the transformation of lives and societies.

The assumption amongst international and intergovernmental organisations that participation in development initiatives is necessarily an adult affair was challenged in the early 1990s by agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children as they began to explore the potential of children’s participation. This interest was partly stimulated by the 1989 UNCRC in which participation appears as a key theme alongside protection and provision (Santos Pais, 2000).
From a rights-based perspective, participation is not only a right in itself but also a vital means to the realisation of children’s other rights. In the intervening years, children’s participation has become an important element of development efforts - as evidenced in the burgeoning of manuals, training initiatives, practice standards, workshops, and in the appointment by international and intergovernmental agencies of staff with the specific responsibility to promote participatory programming.

Review of the organisational and academic literature that has appeared in the intervening years reveals that children’s participation is conceptualised and pursued in a wide variety of ways and at different levels: from children representing their countries at UN gatherings and ‘Junior 8’ summits, to children’s clubs in rural villages engaged in community development, such as in Nepal (Rajhbandary et al., 2002) and Sri Lanka (Hart, 2003). Common to most initiatives is the aim to achieve transformation of children’s lives in some manner. In part, this transformation is considered as a result of the experience of participation through which the young learn new skills, acquire confidence, expand, networks, etc., through which relationships - particularly those between children and adults - are reformulated to become more egalitarian (O’Kane, 2002: 2). Such transformation is also envisaged as a product of participatory activities in themselves by ensuring, for example, that the decisions made within various forums of governance take full account of the views and concerns of children. Although not always made explicit, the envisaged cumulative effect of such transformation at the personal and institutional levels should ultimately be a broad transformation of society in ways that guarantee the realisation of children’s rights. The vision has been clearly articulated by Marta Santos Pais who, in commenting on the UNCRC and children’s right to participate, noted that:

...the child is envisaged as a subject of rights, who is able to form and express opinions, to participate in decision-making processes, to intervene as a partner in the process of social change and in the building up of democracy (2000: 4).

The enthusiasm for participatory development with children amongst international and intergovernmental organisations has emerged in parallel with, if not later than, the appearance of child-led movements in many parts of the global South. Most commonly consisting of associations of working children, these latter initiatives have been supported by an array of individuals including religious figures (notably Catholic priests inspired by liberation theology), community activists, and radical educationalists (Liebel, 2002; Hickey and Mohan, 2005). While such movements and organisations often share important similarities in

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For discussion of participatory initiatives around the world see the wealth of articles in the journal *Children, Youth and Environments* 16(2) - 17(3) www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/
outlook and aims with international and intergovernmental agencies regarding children's participation, there are also significant differences. Consequently, in order to offer a coherent argument within a brief paper, I focus my discussion principally on the latter. There are, in any case, numerous detailed discussions of children's movements – especially those of working children – that may be consulted (e.g. Coly and Terenzio, 2007; Cussianovich, 2001; James and McGillicudy, 2001; Liebel et al., 2001; Liebel, 2003; Reddy, 2007).

Rationale of the Paper

In the late 1990s the widespread enthusiasm for (adult) participatory development began to be challenged by more critical perspectives, generally from individuals who had witnessed the limitations of practice first-hand. Starting from the premise that participation’s objective is to “…ensure the ‘transformation’ of existing development practice and, more radically, the social relations, institutional practices and capacity gaps which cause social exclusion” (Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 13), this critique has focused a good deal on the common disconnect between local participatory efforts and larger systems, structures and power relations.

Little of the discussion around the politics of participation has emerged in relation to efforts involving the young. While children’s ‘empowerment’ and the ‘transformation’ of their lives are clearly elaborated as aims of participatory initiatives, the connection between immediate changes that individual participants experience and wider processes of societal change has been considered only intermittently (e.g. Ennew, 2001; Ansell, 2005; White and Choudhury, 2007). In the following discussion I focus on two specific themes that may serve to stimulate a more sustained debate around this inter-connection. The two themes identified - ‘the spatial imagining of children’s lives’ and ‘the politics of recognition’ - bring into view certain assumptions that are fundamental to current programmatic efforts. As I hope to convince, these assumptions merit interrogation with some urgency if participatory approaches to development are to have any profound and lasting impact on the lives of impoverished children in the global South.

Space: The Primacy of the ‘Local’

By supposedly focusing on the personal and the local as sites of empowerment and knowledge, participatory approaches minimize the importance of the other places where power and knowledge are located, for example with ‘us’ in the Western development community, and with the state (Cooke and Kothari, 2001: 12).

21 See, for example: Cleaver, 1999; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Hickey and Mohan, 2004.
As Mohan and Stokke have explained, during the 1990s the ‘local’ was increasingly emphasised over the ‘general’, to the extent that it emerged as the principal site of “knowledge generation and development intervention” (2000: 247-8). Within neoliberal approaches to development, as promoted by organisations such as the World Bank, local participation has been seen as an aspect of decentralisation, itself considered the primary means of achieving good governance, the more efficient delivery of services, and “a new communitarian spirit” (Mohan and Stokke, 2000: 251). Arguably, the overall aim is to enable the market to function more effectively while ensuring that citizen activity occurs at a safe distance - physically and politically - from the centres of power.

The local is also particularly valorised in the so-called “populist approach” associated with Robert Chambers, which privileges local knowledge over that of outside experts and seeks to ‘enable’ or ‘facilitate’ local people to take ownership of development processes (Chambers, 1983; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). The thinking behind this approach is, in important senses, distinct from that of organisations promoting a neo-liberal agenda. But, since it fails to situate local participation within a wider political context, the outcomes are arguably destined to remain the same. In other words, by conceptualizing the ‘local’ as separable from larger structures and systems, participatory development leaves unexamined and unchallenged the forces that reproduce poverty and marginality as a matter of course. Thus, the political-economic status quo remains firmly intact. More than this, ‘participation’ becomes a means, intended or otherwise, to produce compliant subjects of the state and producers / consumers within the global market. Thus, far from promoting active citizenship capable of challenging inequities and social injustice, participation may be a means of co-option and silencing. As Henkel and Stirrat have suggested:

…the projects of the new development orthodoxy tend to integrate the beneficiaries of their projects into national and international political, economic and ideological structures – incidentally, structures about which the people concerned generally have very little control (2001: 183).

The critique of ‘localism’ is especially relevant to children’s participation. Agencies such as UNICEF commonly conceptualise the child within a spatial schema that is highly normative. This schema is depicted in the form of a child figure nested within concentric circles of relationship that extend from those kin closest to the child to an abstract ‘society’ furthest away. The domains of children’s participation have been mapped directly on to this spatial depiction of relationships with the invocation of developmental stages adding a temporal dimension. This can be seen in the figure below created by UNICEF.

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5) A similar critique has been levelled against grassroots and identity politics popular since the 1960s in the West. Boggs (2000) has dismissed such phenomena as ‘antipolitics’.
The evidence from many parts of the global South (and, indeed, from amongst the poor in the global North) calls into question the appropriateness of such a schema, pointing not only to its highly static character but also to the socio-cultural and political-economic conditions that it assumes. Contemporary phenomena such as intra-state conflict and mass displacement, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, environmental degradation, and rural-urban migration, have all added to entrenched poverty in creating responsibilities for children that necessitate their involvement in a range of settings that extend far beyond the home, school and immediate neighbourhood.

The capacity of immediate family and locale to support children may also be undermined by economic restructuring resulting from global capitalist expansion and neo-liberal reform. Katz has shown this process at work in her longitudinal study of the rural Sudanese village of Howa where, as she notes, such forces have led directly to “the destabilization of the household as a site of production and reproduction” (2004: 151). Katz explains that two interconnected processes were particularly implicated here: (1) governmental efforts (funded by Japan and Kuwait) to incorporate a hitherto primarily subsistence-oriented rural economy into the global market, (2) structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund which led to the removal of food subsidies. In this way, everyday forms of exchange became “monetized” and individuals, including the young, were compelled to become more mobile. Consequently, the social relations and cohesion within the household and community were attenuated. Such processes urge us to question the viability of assumptions about children’s ‘nestedness’

Taken from UNICEF (2003) *State of the World’s Children* p. 3.
within expanding arenas of civic engagement, as suggested by UNICEF. In short, we should wonder about the status of the ‘local’ in light of processes that, as Katz argues, have “catapulted (young people) out of their community into an intensely uncertain future” (2004: 151).

The efforts of development organisations to convene meetings at which children are encouraged to express their concerns and aspirations to national and international political elites might appear to address the constraints of an overly-localised focus, through providing a platform for children’s voices to be heard by leaders responsible for policy that affects their lives. However, a cursory review of the reports of such meetings and the formal statements that are commonly produced by participating children reveal a level of generality that suggests the underlying purpose to be symbolic rather than substantive. On the other hand, the more concrete participatory activities in villages and urban neighbourhoods rarely seem to lead to the involvement by children or the serious consideration of their concerns in regular processes of decision-making even in local forums. By and large, children’s participation in community development – as promoted by international organisations – is more likely to consist of activities and processes that run in parallel with those of adults rather than as an integrated part of local, let alone, national processes of governance. Thus, as I have suggested elsewhere, participation by the young often remains in a virtual ‘box’ (Hart, 2003).

One conceptual consequence of the localisation of children’s participation is the maintenance of a narrow view of power relations as these shape the lives and possibilities of children. In this way the meso and macro level forces that constrain the potential of the young to contribute to societal change and development are insufficiently accounted for. At the same time, consideration of power relations becomes fixed particularly upon children’s relationships with adults in their immediate environment. Asymmetrical power relations between children and those who are presumed to play the most direct role in their lives - typically teachers, community figures and, above all, parents – come to be seen as a major inhibiting factor to their participation and, consequently, the progressive realisation of their rights (e.g. Lansdown, 2006; O’Kane, 2007).

Politics: More Than ‘Recognition’

Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live (Prout and James, 1997: 8).

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4 On the other hand, certain grassroots initiatives have achieved this kind of integration into regular processes of local-level governance. A notable example is the Concerned for Working Children organisation in India. See Reddy and Ratna (2002).
Agency perceptions that inappropriate attitudes, ignorance or fear constitute a major impediment to children's effective participation in development processes that could lead to the realisation of their rights has given rise to a common emphasis upon advocacy efforts, sometimes in preference to on-the-ground programming (White, 2007: 510). A key aim of these efforts is to achieve widespread recognition by adults and adult institutions of children's right and capacity to participate (e.g. Liebel, 2003; Bartlett, 2005; Lansdown, 2006). In this sense, there is a commonality with feminism, BME and gay activism in the focus upon recognition of a section of the population commonly ignored, marginalised or disrespected. Rather than challenging sexism/androcentrism, racism or homophobia, the achievement of children's engagement as full social actors is seen to lie in overcoming adultism (Alanen, 1994; IREWOC, 2005). Asymmetries of power constructed around distinctions of gender, sexuality, ‘race’/ethnicity, and age require remedy in social and cultural change which, as Fraser has explained, may involve “transforming wholesale patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication in ways that would change everyone’s social identity” (2003: 13).

Arguably this pursuit of a “politics of identity” has taken the place of a “politics of redistribution”. In light of the comprehensive rejection of Marxism, theorisation and challenge focused on the underlying forces that create material inequalities have been rendered outré. For Boggs, however, the politics of identity is “a contradiction in terms” (2000: 232). In his view the focus on difference has blinded us to commonalities in the experience of disempowerment and impoverishment due to global capitalism. He identifies the following specific problems:

… privileging the “discursive field” over structural factors and preoccupation with localized micro concerns in such a way that the macro realm of state governance, corporate power, and global economy is diminished (217).

The focus on recognition of children as a distinct and hitherto marginalised population group would seem to fall prey to the tendencies that Boggs bemoans. This is an important point to bear in mind. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether a focus on difference need necessarily cause us to overlook commonalities in the experience of impoverishment amongst large swathes of the population, including the young, resulting from structural factors. It is surely possible to address the injustices associated with lack of recognition while also challenging injustice arising as a result of mal-distribution in the realm of political-economy. This is the task that Fraser sets us (1997, 2003). Observing that “struggles for recognition occur in a world of exacerbated material inequality”, she urges development of an approach that combines “the cultural politics of difference” with “the social politics of equality.” (1997: 11-12)

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5) The organisation that has perhaps gone furthest in this regard is Save the Children, Sweden. For further information see http://www.rb.se/eng/AboutUs/Workmethods.htm.
How might we understand Fraser’s argument in relation to the aim of improving children’s situations in the global South through their participation? Firstly, we must pay attention to the political-economic as well as the socio-cultural dimensions of young people’s lives. Overwhelmingly, the children who are envisaged by international and intergovernmental agencies as the targets of participatory programming are from the lower (though perhaps not the very lowest) classes. While this basic point is openly stated, analysis of the obstacles and difficulties associated with low socio-economic standing is often very limited, if not altogether absent. Yet, the lives of poor children are constrained not simply by lack of recognition of them as children (their place in the “status order of society”, according to Fraser) but also by their membership of the rural underclass or urban proletariat (their place in the “economic structure” (Fraser, 2003: 19).

A potential objection to Fraser’s argument may be raised to the effect that, when asked about their priority concerns, children themselves often tend to focus on the disrespect and social marginalisation they experience rather than on the political-economic forces that impact negatively upon them. However, such emphasis may tell us more about the processes through which children articulate their concerns than about the underlying forces that constrain their lives. Amongst international and intergovernmental agencies, in particular, a trend has emerged for conducting one-off consultations where, it has been observed, adults practice “ritualised humility” (White and Choudhury, 2007: 530) in attending to the perspectives of children.  

These consultations often lead to publications in which children are represented as speaking in one voice, commonly expressing sentiments that mirror the values, mandate or agenda of the organisations concerned. Such consultations are conducted in lieu of sustained dialogue involving the open-ended, co-construction of knowledge by children and adults. Moreover, by positioning children as the experts whose ideas are valued over and above, rather than as complementary to, those of adults significant issues that impact their lives but about which they may have little direct knowledge are ignored. The current reverence for through and ‘children’s voices’ should not cause us to overlook the need for thorough and broad-ranging analysis.

Children who are engaged consistently in participatory initiatives and who have the space and encouragement to reflect upon their situation may well come to express concerns that relate both to socio-cultural and political-economic factors. The statements made by the members of working children’s organisations are illustrative. For example, at the first International Meeting of Working Children, held in India in 1996, the working child delegates from thirty-two countries issued the following set of demands, since referred to as ‘The Kundapur Declaration’:  

6) White and Choudhury depict the attitude of adults towards children at such consultations thus: “You understand your situation so much better than we do, we must learn from you, you are the important ones.” (2007: 530).

1. We want recognition of our problems, our initiatives, proposals and our process of organisation.
2. We are against the boycott of products made by children.
3. We want respect and security for ourselves and the work that we do.
4. We want an education system whose methodology and content are adapted to our reality.
5. We want professional training adapted to our reality and capabilities.
6. We want access to good health care for working children.
7. We want to be consulted in all decisions concerning us, at local, national or international level.
8. We want the root causes of our situation, primarily poverty, to be addressed and tackled.
9. We want more activities in rural areas and decentralisation in decision-making, so that children will no longer be forced to migrate.
10. We are against exploitation at work but we are for work with dignity with hours adapted so that we have time for education and leisure.

Some of these demands have long been central to the work of international and intergovernmental agencies, particularly number one that refers to recognition and numbers four and six that relate to basic services. A gradual shift amongst international and intergovernmental organisations away from seeking the total elimination of child work / labour has also led to qualified support for demands regarding working conditions (demands number three and ten). However, the demand to overcome the root causes of child work (number eight) – a demand reiterated in some form in subsequent declarations – has been addressed in piecemeal fashion at best by international and intergovernmental organisations as part of their child participation and child rights programming.

In the meantime, the political-economic forces associated with neo-liberalism as manifest, for example, in the trade policies of the US and EU, in the measures imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund on indebted governments, in the privatisation of basic services and in the unfettered movement of international capital, continue to perpetuate poverty, inequality and exploitation (De Vylde, 2000; Stiglitz, 2002; Harvey, 2003; Cooke, 2004; Tomasevski, 2005, Harriss, 2007). There is a danger, observed by Ansell, that international and intergovernmental organisations, under the banner of participation, divest themselves of responsibility to tackle such issues:

It is issues such as budget allocations and structural adjustment programmes that really impact on young people's lives. These are areas in which Third World people in general (not only the young) are disenfranchised through the influence of the IFIs. So long as structural conditions persist which prevent children's lives from being ameliorated, the right of young people to express a view is arguably irrelevant. Indeed, children's participation may be a low-cost exercise that makes children appear responsible for removing themselves from a situation of poverty that can be addressed only by those with real political power (2005: 245-6).
Conclusion

During the past 15 or more years, considerable efforts have been made by international and intergovernmental organisations to promote participation as a means to realise the rights and enhance the lives of children in the global South. The evidence suggests that while participants themselves may have benefited in a range of immediate ways – notably through the enhancement of self-confidence, knowledge, skills and networks – more systemic changes that would positively affect the lives of all remain elusive. It may be time, therefore, to reflect more deeply and thoroughly on the relationship between participatory initiatives and wider societal change.

In this brief paper I have broached two amongst many possible themes – the localisation of participation and the singular pursuit of recognition – that bring to light the politics which inevitably mediate the relationship between children's participation and development. It is my contention that the way in which agencies engage with such political issues will determine the extent to which children's participation contributes to the kinds of change that ensure the rights of all are realised.

The enormity of the task facing international and intergovernmental agencies in tackling the processes and challenging the structures that would contain the transformative potential of children’s participation should not be underestimated. There are not only needs to enhance technical and analytical capacity amongst agency personnel but, more importantly, to sharpen political will and to build new forms of alliance. To even reach the point where children’s participation might become an element of profound processes of change requires agencies to be clear that their primary obligations are to children and not, in fact, to donors. This, in itself, raises a host of complex practical and political issues. Intergovernmental organisations face particular difficulties due to a *modus operandi* that compels them to work in partnership with national governments. How, then, to ensure that children’s aspirations and concerns inform processes of change when such change would directly contradict governmental agendas in terms, for example, of securing the wealth and privilege of elites, or containing certain ethnic minorities?

In the view of some authors, we are mistaken to believe that the apparent failure of development efforts to achieve profound change is the consequence of incompetence, poor design, lack of resources or institutional amnesia. Our mistake arises from a misunderstanding of the underlying aim of international and intergovernmental agencies - which is to manage the effects of underdevelopment rather than to achieve meaningful transformation of political and economic realities. As Duffield has recently written: “Rather than narrowing the life-chance gulf, development is better understood as attempting to contain the circulatory and destabilizing effects of underdevelopment’s non-insured surplus life” (2007: 19). This pessimistic view discounts the potential role of ordinary people. However, for agency workers and the wider citizenry to ensure that development efforts lead to meaningful change, it seems essential that the aid relationship is reformulated.
In place of detached benevolence, it seems vital to take as starting-point the understanding that we are all participants – implicated politically and economically – in the realisation of lasting improvement in the lives of impoverished and marginalised children.

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