

CHILDREN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

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An Experiment

Let me begin by narrating an experiment we had in a coastal village in Kanyakumari district called Mel Manakudy¹.

Sr. Sasikala, headmistress of Little Flower School, Mel Manakudy, was ready to make some new experiments in the school to make the school children respond to the needs of the community around.

Fortunately for her, the village had been organised into 23 neighbourhood communities of about 30 families each, with each community having a president, vice-president, secretary, joint-secretary, treasurer, etc.

These neighbourhood communities had gone through a Participatory Learning Action (PLA)² process which includes exercises like resource-mapping, social mapping, prioritising of needs through venn-diagram, goal-fixing, making micro-plans and long-term plans, budgeting etc.

When they did their venn-diagram - called also *chappathi* diagram - they used paper *chappathis* of various sizes to prioritise

¹ S. Patrick, "Neighbourly Adolescents," Health Action, vol. 12, no. 12 (December 1999), 13-14.

² Nala Oli Iyakkam, Nala Kamittikalin Inaippu Amaippum Makkal Pankerppu Thittamidalum, Nagercoil: Nala Oli Iyakkam, Lizzil Illam.

the problems they faced and gave the biggest *chappathi* to the problem of alcohol.

Their calculation showed that as much as Rupees 9.8 million were spent a year on alcohol. This in a village where the people would plead with their parish priests for a project of three or four lakhs from abroad for a community hall or so.

The school, by way of responding to this problem, organised the entire children of the school into 23 groups, basing on the 23 neighbourhood groups the school children belonged to. Each group was put under a teacher-animator.

These teacher-animators then were given special sessions by a team from *Thiruppu Munai*, an alcoholic rehabilitation centre in the adjacent town of Nagercoil.

The artistically talented among the teachers put the basic messages in the form of a variety entertainment that impressed on the minds of the people the various ways alcohol affected individuals and communities and the ways to fight the problem. And each of the 23 groups of children was trained to perform the variety entertainment.

On a fine evening, children took a rally around the village carrying placards and shouting slogans focussing on the menace of alcoholism. A public meeting followed this.

Later on, the twenty-three groups of children performed the cultural programme in their respective neighbourhood communities of about thirty families each.

The fact that their own children were performing made the programme more appealing to the parents and impactful. The teachers were there to help in the discussions that followed the performance.

In one such neighbourhood community, a fisherman called out to his wife as soon as the programme was over. "Come here," he said in a gruff voice that used to defy the sound of the waves. The people were wondering what was going to happen. "Take this money," he added giving his wife Rs. 60/-. "I was keeping it for my drinks today. But after seeing my daughter perform and hearing what has been said I have decided not to drink any more."

People thought it was only an impulse of the moment. But the man kept it up for quite some time. A few others too either gave up

drinking or, due to the "gentle pressure" of children, reduced the intake or volunteered to undergo de-addiction therapy.

The cultural sessions initiated by children were followed up in each neighbourhood community by six more educational sessions on alcoholism conducted with the support of the parish animation group. Eventually the local St. Andrew's Hospital had a separate clinic open for helping the alcoholics to cope with the problem of their addiction.

This is an example of how children can make an impact for social change. Given the neighbourhood community system the village had, it is possible for a creative school leadership to keep intervening this way on various issues the village faces and give the children a sense of fulfilment, meaning and direction and empower them to become agents of change.

However, the above example does not portray the full import of what we mean by the title, "Children as agents of change."

Levels of Participation

The children as far as the above narrative goes come as "participants" only towards the end of the process. True, they do contribute as change agents here. But only as executors of somebody else's plans. Others identify the issues, others prioritise the needs, others decide on the intervention, and others work out the strategies and methods. And children in all these phases are just passive recipients, so to say, and become active agents only in acting out a programme worked out by others.

But the children could be and do a lot more as change agents.

Elsewhere we have more telling examples of children at the earlier stages of participation.

Levels and stages of participation differ.

Some participate by being merely the beneficiaries of others' projects! Some, as in the above narrative, act on others' decisions. Some participate by just deciding to choose among various alternatives thought out by others. Some go further and participate also in identifying the various alternatives to a problem identified and presented by others. And some participate at the very stage of identifying the problems themselves.

The earlier the stage they begin the participation, the greater the control they have over the whole process. The more they are in charge.³

Children in charge

Today there are efforts all over the world to help children to be in charge.

Children refuse to be anymore just objects to be looked at. They are not anymore to just listen to whatever the elders say without being listened to.⁴ They are not any more to be kept away from decision-making fora and processes.

They are demanding today that their viewpoints be also heard. They are beginning to participate in various social and political decision-making fora. They too want to determine the direction of tomorrow's world.

They are not anymore just to be governed but to govern. Not in the sense of just preparing for tomorrow's governance. They are to govern now. And they have begun to share governance in certain places.

Two recent publications by Roger A. Hart entitled, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*⁵ and *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*⁶ contain abundant examples of how children of various age levels all over the world are becoming participating citizens.

Participatory Learning Action

How, for example, to get the children of five to six years identify by themselves the problem of environmental pollution and

³ Edwin M.J., "A Participating People," *Health Action*, vol. 9, no. 8, (August 1996), 18-20.

⁴ Edwin M.J., "More than Objects and Beneficiaries: Suggestion for a Strategy Design for Sustained Action for Adolescent Health," *Health Action*, vol. 12, no. 12 (December 1999), 17-19.

⁵ Roger A. Hart, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*, Florence: International Child Development Center, UNICEF, 1992.

⁶ Roger A. Hart, *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Youth Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*, New York: UNICEF & London: Earthscan, 1999.

involve accordingly? Very simple. Just make them count the number of birds that come near their class-window on particular seasons, and keep notes. Later get them compare the differences in the number of birds in the same seasons of the succeeding years. They will come to realise that there is a problem and that some thing has to be done.

Similarly the various rural participatory appraisal processes like the Participatory Learning Action (PLA)⁷ mentioned in relation to the Mel Manakudy experiment above are a big help.

Children enjoy the various exercises in PLA wherein communities in the village put on a big paper or just draw on the floor various maps which depict the situation of their village or community, and mark with colours and symbols the various indicators relating to various aspects of their life and problems.

Even when the process is for the entire population, it is children who show keener interest in this and come out with more accurate data and sharper dimensions of the picture.

The exercises like resource-mapping, social mapping, timeline, trend-line, etc give children a grasp of the situation, the problems, the needs and challenges that must be responded to. Venn diagram or *chappathi* diagram helps them to prioritise the needs and issues and leads them to formulate their vision and evolve goal statements.

In places where children do their own PLA separately, they go on to make their own micro or long-term plans. Or if it is the entire community that makes its plans in the neighbourhood, children watch with interest and see where they could come in.

Community Monitoring

After planning by community, comes the monitoring by the community to ensure that it achieves what it set out to achieve. And children do especially well in this stage.

An important aspect in community monitoring is putting the project and the goals in visible terms like putting it in the form of

⁷ Edwin M.J., Maria John B. and Jeyakumar A.(97) *Makkal Thittamidalil Manavar Panku*, Nagercoil: Nala Oli Iyakkam, 1997.

drawings, maps and symbols on a blackboard, chart, etc. In addition to the goals, the achievements in relation to goals are also made visible.

This visibility helps the community to comprehend the process and thereby leads to a greater mobilisation of the community. Such ongoing flow of information as regards the project the people are involved in, keeps raising people's awareness of changes. It keeps also giving them a sense of belonging and pride as a community, and enthusiasm to proceed further.

Robert A. Hart gives an excellent example of community-based monitoring from an extremely poor neighbourhood in Little Baguio on the steep slopes of Olongapo in the Philippines:

In the centre is a large, well-designed community-based monitoring board, with up-to-the-minute data on every house for all residents to see. Children would greatly enjoy collecting data and mapping it on such boards. This is an excellent opportunity for school teachers to engage children in a valuable ongoing role for their communities, which has great benefits for schoolwork in literacy, mathematics, and map skills.

Small groups of children from district neighbourhoods throughout the community could become the experts for their neighbourhood cluster and even take responsibility for establishing a community based monitoring board among their own small cluster of houses. The radical idea here is that of making the research process continuously visible to the community.

Determining what indicators a community needs use to assess its development should be an effort involving the whole community. Where no community research, planning, and evaluation process has been established, children can, with a little help, develop their own monitoring system as a first step in convincing the community of the value of this kind of research. The critical step is for children to understand that the first need is to determine what they wish to assess and then creatively identify indicators that will accurately reflect that phenomenon. Brainstorming indicators in-group, and then trimming them

down to a reasonable number of realistic indicators would be a fascinating exercise for school children of any age.⁸

Neighbourhood Community Network

The successful operation of community-based monitoring in the Philippines, for Roger A Hart, is built on "a neighbourhood clustering approach." "Each neighbourhood cluster includes 15 to 25 families, who elect a leader to represent their interests in the larger community organisation. This model could easily be repeated with schoolchildren."⁹

Neighbourhood Community Networks are emerging throughout the world as the new paradigm to ensure people's participation and governance by people.

Basic communities of Latin America are an example.

The "*Ayalkoottams*" of fifty neighbouring families each, established already in 215 panchayats by the government of Kerala, networked at the level of the village and linked to panchayat structures, is another historic development.¹⁰

A booklet published by the State Planning Commission of Kerala gives interesting details on Vidura, one of its model panchayats.¹¹ Situated some 30 km from Trivandrum, capital of Kerala, this panchayat has neighbourhood parliaments of about fifty families each - each of these neighbourhoods consisting in turn of family-cells of ten families each. Planning begins from below at these neighbourhood parliaments, called "*Ayalkoottams*" in Malayalam. The plans made at these neighbourhoods are taken to the village parliaments called village sabhas. From village sabha the plans are referred for approval by the intervillage fora of the panchayat. As 40% of the "planned expenditure" of the State is put

⁸ Roger A. Hart, *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice*, 136

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Elamon, P.V. Joy Aniyar and P. Krishnakumar, *Gunamenmayude Puthia Vidhanangal* (Papers presented at an international conference on democratic decentralization), Trivandrum: State Planning Board, 2000.

¹¹ Muralidharan, Sharadha Pillai and P. Madhusoodhanan, *Adhikara Vikendriyathayum Sudharyathayum*, Trivandrum: State Planning Board, 2000.

at the disposal of the panchayats in the state, for them to plan and implement on their own, decisions and discussions at these levels carry a lot of weight. Once they decide on implementing something, then follow also the processes of community monitoring and, later, social auditing, phases where these neighbourhood structures once again have a big role.

Where do the children come in this picture of Vidura panchayat? They too have here their own children's parliament within each of the above-said neighbourhood parliaments called *ayalkkootam*. And these children's neighbourhood parliaments too are federated.

Says Mr. Appukkuttan Kani, the former president of Vidura panchayat regarding his attendance at gram sabha level parliaments of children: "The children amaze us. They are sharp, specific and forthright. They even ask us to change our life-styles. They confronted for example regarding my smoking. How as a president I could fail to give good example in a matter that tells on health was the concern expressed ... And when our children speak we have no other go," he adds with a proud grin.

Children have their own strengths. One of them is their own way of prevailing on adults. They could call people "uncle" and "auntie" and stop even a chief minister's car and ask donations for their park, as the children of the environment-friendly *Taru Mitra* movement did in Bihar. They got away with not just a bigger-than-expected donation, but also with additional money for them to buy sweets.

But whatever be their strengths, like most adults they feel helpless and frustrated unless they have adequate fora and structures to express themselves and get things done.

Like adults too, they should be helped with fora for participatory and direct democracy, for them to come together, to get listened, to talk, discuss and decide together and to act together.

Here, both for adults and children, the above-mentioned concept of neighbourhood community networking has much to offer.

Neighbourhood Action by Children

Let us list a few of the benefits of such neighbourhood networking:

- One: The aspect of smallness makes it ideal for and even to mobilise it for action. As such it could offer the most accessible forum for children to get initiated into social action.
- Two: It is highly accessible: you don't have to get a bus to attend the meetings.
- Three: It offers, so to say, viable and readymade arenas for children to enter into action.
- Four: The fact that it is networked gives children scope to expand into ever-wider realms. It gets you automatically to the wider world through its multi-tier representative structures.
- Five: As it includes everybody in the neighbourhood like a mini electoral ward of the panchayat, and leaves out nobody, it could effectively speak on behalf of people as a mini or parallel government. It could claim to be the organ of people's voice, which in democracy is God's voice.
- Six: It can be effectively linked to civic governance structures and thus could be a forum for people to participate on a day to day basis in governance.
- Seven: It ensures better answerability or accountability
- Eight: It paves way for better transparency in dealings
- Nine: Monitoring is easier. The beneficiaries themselves, now that they are organised into viable structures can have an eye on the processes that are supposed to benefit them.
- Ten: Better owning of the programmes and processes is ensured. The people in the neighbourhood are the real stakeholders and they will tend to show interest in the interventions.
- Eleven: Follow up is easier. Someone living in the neighbourhood itself could often be entrusted with the responsibility to keep track.
- Twelve: It is easily the most natural focus of convergence of many related activities.

Such a neighbourhood-based network or, to put in ecclesial terminology, 'a network of basic human communities' offers a context and a scope for action by children in a way no other approach does. With such neighbourhood communities and their networks children could really take charge and contribute mightily to change the world.