

## **CHILDREN IN GOVERNANCE - A PROCESS THAT FACILITATES CHILD PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING**

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Our focus on children, over the years, has evolved from welfare to development to a rights-based approach. Since then our emphasis has been that the rights-based development of children must be at the centre of our planning. Granting children the right to live with dignity and have access to opportunities for their growth and development remains a major challenge to all of us. In all our efforts to promote the rights of the child there is undoubtedly a shortfall in the case of a child's right to participation. Therefore there is a greater need to explore approaches that address the rights of the children to participate in matters that affect them.

Respect for children as participants is reflected throughout the UN Convention, but is most clearly elaborated in Article 12 which enumerates that "States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child". This article entitles children to be actors in their own lives, not merely passive recipients of care and protection offered by adults. Participation appears as one of the guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. When the right to participation is given equal importance, it makes children realize other rights, achieve justice, influence outcomes and expose abuse of power. In other words, participation is the way to achieve other rights.

Therefore there is a great need for children to participate in matters that affect their lives and it is their right to do so. Experts say that participation is an important element in the development of children and it helps them to enhance their self-esteem, confidence and overall capacities. It also strengthens their independence, resilience and social competence. It is also said that when children are encouraged to express their views they are found to be less vulnerable to abuse and better able to contribute towards their own protection. There is also ample evidence that where children are given a chance to participate they acquire a greater level of confidence and in turn that enhances the quality of participation. They gain skills, confidence and maturity in expressing

their views and influencing decisions. The deeper the level of participation, the more the children are able to influence what happens to them and greater the opportunities for personal development.

We are aware that Child Rights are fundamental freedoms and inherent rights of human beings below the age of eighteen. The UN Convention on the rights of the children defines the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children. Articles 12 and 13 specifically grant the child the right to expression on all matters affecting it, implying thereby that children have the right to participate in decision-making processes and that due weight should be given to their opinions, views and feelings. Though they are entitled to exercise their right to participate in different forums and play a significant role in policy making and implementation, they are denied this right by adults, even by the members of their families, teachers in the schools and leaders in the communities. Also children who live in residential child care units are viewed as passive recipients and not encouraged to take part in any decisions. Adults usually think that children are incapable of participating in any decision-making process. Such an assumption unfortunately silences children's voices and results in underestimation of their potential for participation. Adults usually do not believe that all the children are able to express their views and are capable of contributing thoughtful opinions on a range of issues affecting them. In fact in many areas they can demonstrate equal or even superior competence. They are capable of being creative and express love and compassion and even show their willingness to forgive. Unfortunately, adults too often fail to recognize these capacities because they assess children from an adult's perspective.

In order to help the children achieve the right to participation and realize their potential, many approaches are adapted but one that has been found most suitable where not only can they participate in the decision making process but also influence the adults and bring out their hidden talents, is the Children's Parliament where they come together, share their dreams and aspirations, articulate, discuss and debate on matters relating to their education, health and well-being.

In any democratic country Parliament is the highest decision making body. However, the fact remains that the dreams and aspirations of the people to live a life that ensures prosperity, equality, justice and peace through democratic processes never materializes as they have no say in the decision-making on matters which affect their welfare and as

such they remain helpless and powerless at the mercies of their elected representatives. To make the meaning of the democratic system more understandable it is necessary we inculcate this concept in children when they are young so that they not only understand and respect the principles of democracy but also get the opportunity to think collectively, discuss and debate with one another and express their views and opinions on matters that affect their lives.

In our country we traditionally believe that the well-being of children depends on certain values, such as, obedience, self-discipline, self-sacrifice and willingness to serve elders and are considered as passive recipients of welfare measures rather than as active holders of rights. Particularly in rural and tribal villages we see children often suffer from low self-esteem and low self-confidence and are reluctant to participate and express their views and concerns. This affects the development of their skills and strengths. They also internalize their negative attitudes. They do not have the opportunity to come together and go through a process of dialogue and exchange by which they could assume increasing responsibilities and become active, tolerant and democratic.

When children are involved in a Children's Parliament it not only makes them understand the duties and responsibilities of a citizen but also gives them the ability to articulate and the opportunity to participate in certain decisions that can influence adults. Further, it equips children with the knowledge of the functioning of governance and how they could play an active role in their own communities presently and in the future as majors. They go through the process of identifying their own problems, issues and needs, discuss them, take decisions to set things right, prepare certain plans of action and get them implemented and evaluated. Through this process the importance of participation in self-governance is realized. Above all, the process of getting educated, organized and empowered becomes an on-going process. In due course, children learn life skills such as communication, leadership, community resource management, ecological awareness, sex education, team spirit, networking and public relations.

The concept of Children's Parliament challenges the notion that only the most confident and articulate can understand or participate in our society. It enables children from all backgrounds and of all abilities to work together and share experiences that make active responsible citizenship a reality.

Objectives of Children's Parliament may be enumerated as:

- *To enable children to develop their self confidence, self-awareness and self-esteem by creating an opportunity for them to meet and express their views and opinions on matters that affect their lives and what is happening in the world around them.*
- *To provide opportunities for children to be meaningfully engaged in the democratic processes at local (Panchayat), state and national levels and to learn the duties and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society.*
- *To show that there are processes beyond the political arena which function as quick and effective agents of change.*
- *To make adults understand the meaning of Child Rights so that they can listen to the children and value their views, opinions and suggestions and encourage them to take part in all decision-making processes that matter to them.*
- *To develop and initiate programmes that promote the rights of the children as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.*

Children's Parliament is found to be the best platform for children's voices to be heard and their rights to be realized. It equips them with the knowledge of the functioning of governance and how they could play an active role in their own communities. They simply go through the process of identifying their own problems, issues and needs, discuss them, take decisions to set them right, prepare certain plans to take action, implement those plans and evaluate what has been achieved. Through this process the importance of their participation in self-governance is promoted. Above all, the process of getting educated organized and empowered and networking with others then remains as an on-going procedure.

Child Development experts opine that participation is a vital element in the development of children. In the rural areas Children's Parliaments help the children to overcome shyness, fear, timidity, backwardness and low self-esteem and replace them with boldness, self-esteem and self-confidence. When they are in their peer company,

away from the gaze of adults rural children open up. The freedom they get helps them to express their hidden thoughts and feelings. They are also motivated to express their aspirations and desires. Their independence and resilience strengthen and cause their social competence to bloom from corporate oneness. It is also learned from experience that when children are allowed to express themselves they become less vulnerable to abuse and are better able to contribute towards their own protection. The increased level of confidence releases the leadership qualities of children and enhances the quality of their participation through better inter-personal relationships and team spirit.

### **Our Experience**

Initially a few Children's Parliaments were introduced in some parts of the country including the Andaman Islands and having found that they are indeed the key to sustainable child participation, Children's Parliaments were initiated on all our Projects located in 17 states in India. Now more than 400 Children's Parliaments are actively functioning and the age group of the children is between six and eighteen years. A group of children from the villages form a Parliament elect their own Chief Minister and other Cabinet Ministers; discuss issues and problems relating to their lives, families and the communities. This has become a learning experience for us to enable children explore various and new approaches to participation and influence decisions in their favor, their families and their communities thereby making their surroundings more child friendly. Guided by these objectives, Children's Parliaments have become a movement which symbolizes the inclusion of children for justice and peace, giving us a hope that one day this movement will spread all over the country making children of India exercise their rights to create a society free from abuse, exploitation, corruption and hate and this hopefully will influence adults to become more responsible towards the children.

Child's right to participation is closely linked to freedom of expression and it is also related to fulfilling the right to information. When they come together and actively take part in Children's Parliaments, they have access to much information. Encouragement in speaking out empowers them to influence the thinking and perceptions of their families. They enable their families to change their decisions. They influence the community by promoting civic activities, improving school infrastructure and increasing school enrollment. They also influence the Panchayat regarding their education, health

and well-being and also challenge abusive behavior of adults, if they happen to experience it so that their passive obedience does not render them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The Children's Parliaments have helped to break the myth that children must be in passive subservience to parents and adults and are incapable of decision making. In a certain village when alcoholism was a problem the Children's Parliament did not allow drunken men to enter the village. And when a school child was beaten by the School Master the Children's Parliament took up the issue with the Head Master of the School.

Children's Parliaments also discuss serious issues like child labour, protection of wild life and the environment, religious tolerance, early marriages, alcoholism and luring of children and women away from the villages on the pretext of better jobs while inducting them into slavery or the flesh trade. Children's Parliaments act as a deterrent by taking timely and appropriate action against negatives. When strengthened with good bonding children taken on more responsibilities to become active citizens. Thus they contribute to the process of development in the village.

Children's Parliaments bring about change in children. At home and in school the change in the children is noticed by adults to the extent that they are compelled to sit up and take notice. They notice the improvement in academics, social etiquette behavior and aspirations. Conversely, this transformation in children naturally places obligations not just on the family but also on those like teachers who work with them, make policies, competent authorities of all levels, politicians, who have the wherewithal to address children's concerns, and NGOs. Positive responses from authorities work wonders for the children.

It has been our experience that because Children's Parliaments emphasize equality, justice, opportunity and respect, children are held in high esteem by adults in the surrounding areas. For them the successful functioning of the Children's Parliaments is an eye-opener. Adults have become aware of their myopic perception of children's competence in making decisions and successfully implementing them. Having seen how the Children's Parliaments work as a forum for planning, developing and bringing to fruition the decisions of the children, they now believe that children can be engaged in socially responsible action. Adults begun to listen more to children, respect their views and offer them opportunities to participate in decisions.

Several of our Children's Parliaments went on extensive awareness drives and the authorities gave them opportunities to express themselves. Clean up campaigns are common to all Parliaments. Streets, stations, open drains, coastal areas, soak pits are cleaned up. The children in Melghat, after having seriously discussed amongst themselves on the issue of how defecation in the open areas of the periphery of the villages affects the health of the community, decided that each child would influence their parents and other members in the family to put an end to this age old practice by building individual or community toilets. In The Andamans children sent an 8-point petition to the Administration to make the Islands child-friendly. They will also restore the depleting ecology by planting 10,000 trees in 2010. One of the Children's Parliaments in the Andamans was successful in getting the road to their school repaired and electrified.

In a village in Gujarat the Children's Parliament generated civic sense among shopkeepers and shoppers who littered the area with plastic, paper and waste-material. Now each shop has a dustbin and the village looks neat and tidy. Small though these achievements may be, they are indicators of the failure of competent authorities and pointers to how a unique model of participative education can have a significant impact on society.

Of recent times, children have started to debate in their parliaments on climate change, its impact, their responsibilities and how they can be active protagonists in mitigating its impacts. Though the rural and tribal children have limited knowledge on climate change and what the causes are, they are aware of the fact that it is contributing to adverse impacts on their education, health and above all on the livelihood of their parents, making their parents' and their lives more difficult and somehow they are adapting to the changing climate in silence and while doing so they are experiencing several constraints in adaptation. Through the Children's Parliaments they not only gain more knowledge about climate change but are also motivated to act as agents of change. A group of children from different Parliaments have come together and resolved to influence their fellow children in all the Children's Parliaments that each one of them will plant and care for at least five trees. Through such actions they are also demonstrating the fact that they have the right to participate in policy making concerning climate change as they can contribute significantly towards mitigating its adverse affects and therefore they should be central to the climate change agenda.

As children themselves can not initiate a Children's Parliament, in the initial stages they receive the support from the staff for a certain period of time in the form of orientation and subsequent guidance without exercising any influence or control over their participation. Children are made aware of the principles of what matters they are supposed to participate in and the boundaries of what they are able to influence and their responsibilities. They are also made aware of the barriers they might face in their participation such as possible parental or community opposition to their involvement in certain initiatives, which they have to carefully analyze and prepare themselves with adequate information with which they are provided. Also the opportunity to participate is made available irrespective of their ability, gender, caste, or social or economic status. This challenges the pattern of social exclusion and discrimination if they so exist in the villages. They are taught that in their participation all are to be equally treated and respected. An appropriate place to hold the Children's Parliament is also created. It is ensured that children feel comfortable and relaxed and the space provided is child friendly. It is also ensured that the movement of Children's Parliament has the goodwill of their families and the community so that harmony prevails. In order to make this possible parents are made aware of the aims and objectives of the Children's Parliament and are satisfied with the rights and needs of the children and understand the need to support and protect this initiative of the children.

Children's Parliaments are not intended to be replacements or substitutes for inefficient civic responsibility. As starters, such activities are excellent for building up experience and a track record and boosting self confidence and joint action among children. Children's Parliaments are base-camps for climbing greater heights. The training and experience children get here are the first stepping stones into the lowest rung of the authority ladder. By the time these children become adults and graduate into civic elections, they will be fully prepared to take on local issues. From there on to the Tehsil, District, State and National levels to renew the world - a new form of governance that will be from the grassroots and all-inclusive, performing transparently.

"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it". Children are a gift from God and that gift comes with responsibility which includes providing them with opportunities that enable them to grow as loving, moral, well-disciplined and responsible members of society.

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Holistic Child Development India is a Christian humanitarian organization working towards bringing a lasting improvement in the quality of life of children, their families and communities through different types of development projects with a child-centered approach that promotes the rights, interests and dignity of children. It is a partner of Kindernothilfe e. V., Germany, a child development organization which works in 24 countries in Asia, Africa and South America.