

A JOURNEY IN CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

By the Concerned for Working Children

Compiled and Edited by:

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FOREWARD

We, the Concerned for Working Children have been working in partnership with children for the past 25 years, to enhance their protagonism and participation and realise their rights. In this document we have put together some of the experiences and perceptions related to children's participation that we have gathered over the years and tried to convert these into principles and tools that would further the pedagogy and praxis of children's participation.

For us, it has been an exciting journey and the learning curve has been steep. It has humbled us and shown us how to re establish a relationship with the child within each one of us.

For the children themselves their right to participation is the opening up of a new and exciting experience. For the first time they see the world of adults, they begin to understand how this world works and what they need to do to intervene in it. This experience is often tinged with disappointment, as at times they find that we, adults, haven't made such a good job of it, but there is also joy in the realisation that we do care and that we have learnt to respect them. What the children need from us is an honest, unbiased and in-depth presentation of the way things are and the tools and skills to enable them to build a better world.

This document is an attempt to share the body of knowledge that we have acquired and also to raise several questions those still require answers.

This is by no means a definitive position as the arena of children's participation is only marginally explored. In the course of our work, children constantly reveal new dimensions of themselves and these insights constitute a continual learning process for us adults.

This document, however, does not document processes or methodology and only tries to share some conceptual insights.

It is a document to which we will continue to add and modify as our insights widen and as children continue to teach us more about themselves.

Introduction

Children's Participation is not a project, it is not event based; it is a running theme through every action or intervention and it requires a major paradigm shift. The understanding of participation and the way it is translated into action varies and seems to be defined by the socio-cultural context of the child and the ideological frame surrounding this understanding. However it is important to arrive at a culturally neutral definition of children's participation, where the principles are common, though the manifestations may vary according to the situation of children.

When Children's Participation is seen within the frame of protagonism it takes on another dimension. The right and the ability to advocate on one's own behalf, to be in control and a part of decision making processes and interventions. This form of participation of children and youth enhances the concept of civil society participation and strengthens democratic processes.

Children's participation should enhance children's personhood. Often their individual growth is side lined, especially when they are a part of an organisation. Children's participation should also be in keeping with their capacity and ability (milestones of development) and contribute positively to the process of children's growth and development. However, all this operates within the context of children's rights and their participation is the means by which children realise their rights.

The 'levels' of children's participation are a combination of the nature of children's participation (individual or collective) and the structures in which they participate. Children may participate as individuals or through their organisations or as representatives of their organisations. Children's participation may take place formally or informally and with or without structures. Their participation may be initiated by the children themselves or by adults or as a result of a partnership between children and adults. Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation has actually been rather misleading as it more aptly describes the role of adults vis a vis children's participation, rather than the levels of participation of children¹.

The role that adults play in the arena of children's participation is a wide spectrum. On the one hand it ranges from resisting children's participation to being facilitators of children's participation and ultimately, partners. Adults play these roles consciously and unconsciously and their roles could vary depending on the situation and the children they are with.

Children are political, economic, ecological, socio-cultural and spiritual (religious) beings. There are several arenas where children do and can participate that satisfy one or several aspects of their personhood. The arenas of participation

¹ For levels of children's participation please refer to page 7 & 8 of this document.

are several and varied, the home, school, work, and community, going further to state and international levels.

All the above constitute the ecology of children's participation. To enable children's participation to happen constructively and effectively and in a way that is positive for children, they need to be empowered. The three essential elements of empowerment are: an organisation or forum, access to and use of relevant information and access to resources (structural, material, human and financial).

We the adults can play a proactive role if we wish to enable children's participation. However in order to perform this part adequately, we need to prepare ourselves. This has to be done with utmost seriousness and honesty. And perhaps the first lesson is that we will have to unlearn many things before we can 'learn'.

The context:

The concept of 'the best interest of the child', an underlying framework for the realisation of the CRC implicitly guarantees the participation of children in all decisions concerning them and the CRC is the first international instrument that very strongly advocates for the participation of children and their right to form associations.

The CRC may be divided into three areas of focus. They are the three P's. The articles concerning the **protection** of children, those related to the **provision** of services to children and those concerning **participation** or the recognition of children as political beings with both civil and political rights.

Most of us find it easy to translate into programming the articles of the Convention related to protection and provision. When these are read separately they are easier to translate into action, as it is our (adults) perception of the nature and quality of these articles that we convert into interventions and not those of the children themselves.

Many of us seem to miss the vital link between provision and protection with the right to participation. When read together, this third element gives a whole new dimension to the first two, that children have a right to determine the nature and quality of all protection and provision that they have a right to. In fact this would make it mandatory that all interventions must be designed with the active and informed participation of the children concerned and not by adults alone.

Children have asserted their right to intervene in their environment and change it for the better. As a result many of us have realised that the active and equal participation of children in all matters concerning them is both realistic and beneficial. However in order to enable this we adults and adult led organisations have to examine ourselves critically and redefine our roles, sometimes to the

extent of unlearning what we thought to be 'right' and reconstructing ourselves closer to the children's paradigm.

Unfortunately, though children's right to participation is a much discussed and heavily debated issue, very few have actually been able to translate this into action and make it a ground reality.

Are the principles of Children's Rights universal and is their definitional context neutral? There are perhaps some elements related to children's rights such as those related to the physical well-being of a child that could be universal and context neutral for example, children inhaling toxic substances, carrying heavy weights etc.

However, how do we agree on other aspects that relate to the psychosocial issues related to children? If child marriage is considered harmful in Asia below the age of 18 why is sexual activity permissible for children below this age in the West? Is this related to the development of the individual child or is it a social context that determines what is acceptable and what is not? Or are children living within a 'larger' context subject to different socio-cultural paradigms? Is it therefore possible to arrive at a common/universal set of principles in this regard keeping in mind that each child is unique and develops at a unique pace?

On the other hand we also claim that the socio-cultural, environmental, political and economic variations in children's situations should not be an excuse for diluting the principles of Children's Rights. How do we reconcile these two?

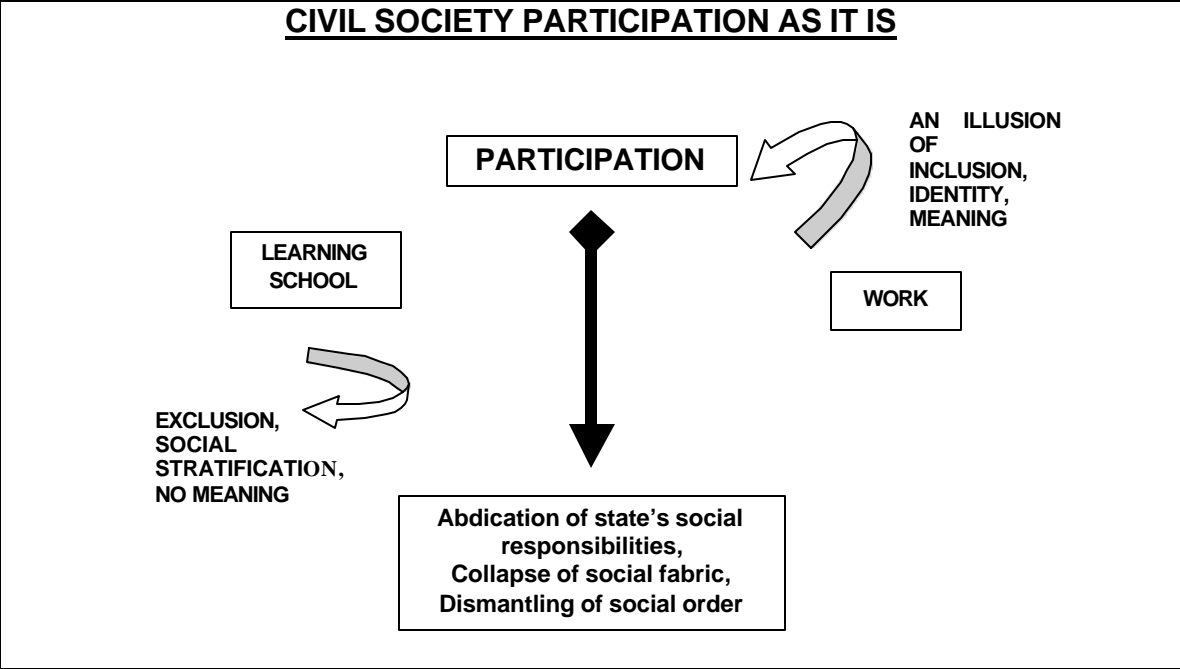
Civil Society Participation:

In several countries of the world, various factors, including the system of education has resulted in social stratification, the increased marginalisation of thousands of people and their political exclusion. This has drastically reduced the participation of civil society. The entire situation is aggravated by the fact that the state is no more accountable and has abdicated its duty and in some cases become the violator of people's rights. There are no safety nets, no protection for the weak and the entire social fabric is unravelling.

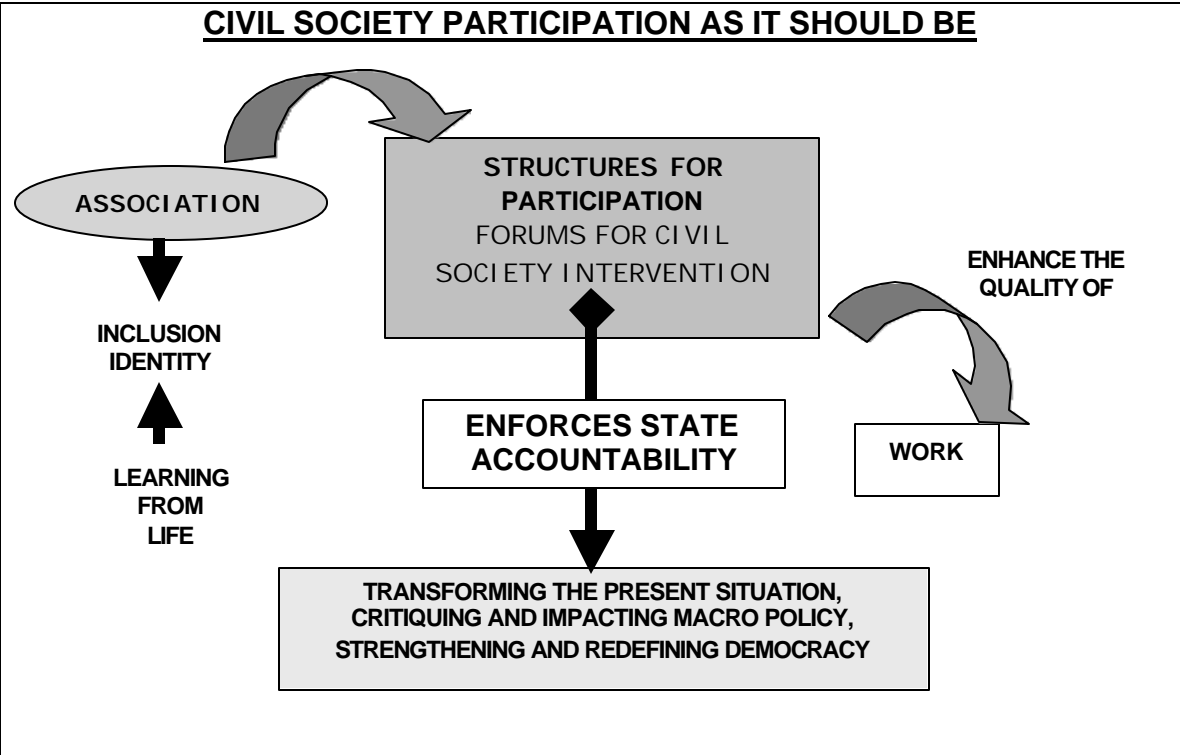
In such a situation children find work a preferred option to schooling, as it gives them an illusion of participation, an identity – the feeling of belonging and meaning to life. However this does not encourage the individual's participation in democratic processes.

Participation appeared in the development context, as an approach (philosophy) to address power relations in society. Participation is seen as part and parcel of the process of empowerment of the disadvantaged. It has firm roots in liberal democratic values and gender justice. It is not seen as a means to achieve development goals, but as an end in itself.

C. Upendranath. The Theory, Potential and Challenges of Participation, Exchanges - 1997



The key to rectify this situation is to enable meaningful, informed and active participation. This also means enabling participation of children and fulfilling article 12 of the CRC. However for children to participate meaningfully they require an organisation or platform where they can come together and share experiences and evolve an identity.



Participation as protagonism:

The young persons we work with have experienced the strength of their organisations and forums such as the Bhima Sangha², Makkala Panchayats³ and Namma Sabha⁴. For these children participation is not just an opportunity to take part in meetings, to be consulted occasionally, or to sing a song at an inaugural function. For them participation is a means to advocate for their own cause and transform their situations. For them participation is a political intervention irrespective of the arena in which they participate. For them, participation is protagonism in the true sense of the word.

They are struggling to fight the injustice they face and are working to build a better world. They are fighting the same battles as those fought by the working class and women's movements. They face the same questions regarding their ability, their intentions and their integrity. They are struggling for their right of entry into political space. They are making tremendous sacrifices because this struggle means a lot to them.

It is this experience with children, that has defined our view of children's participation and we have developed mechanisms/structures, methodologies and tools to strengthen these processes.

We believe that children must be given the right to intervene in their environment and change elements that do not uphold their rights as children.

In the early years Bhima Sangha did not have enough support, but once they grew stronger in membership, they were able to question adults if required. Some families tried to discourage them from being part of their organisation. At that time, children said "You may not want anything more from your lives, we do. We want the world." - Manjamma, Panchayat Member

Levels of participation:

² Bhima Sangha is a union of working children in Karnataka facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children, with a membership of over 13,000.

³ Makkala Panchayats are children's elected councils. They are the forums through which all children of a Panchayat participate in decision making and governance.

⁴ Namma Sabha is a union of young professionals and artisans. This was set up by young people who were members of Bhima Sangha.

Children's participation is no different from that of adults. Children may represent themselves as individuals or be represented by their organisations or they may even represent their organisation. When they represent themselves, they tend to focus on issues that concern them personally. As members of an organisation they tend to voice larger/common concerns that in turn become the concerns of the organisation.

When children participate as representatives of their organisations they bring with them the mandate of their entire organisation. Their responsibilities increase, as they have to ensure the optimum use of opportunities to raise the issues of the members. This also implies a very high level of accountability and we have seen children's organisations that have several checks and balances in place to ensure that this accountability is respected and maintained.

It is important to point out that issues related to 'representation' should also be considered important for the participation of adults. How representative are we? How participatory are the processes we are part of? Should we not work towards ensuring these for adults as well?

Children may participate in formal or informal consultations. In both these scenarios, they may or may not be listened to and their inputs may or may not be taken on board. It is possible that children are a part of formal consultative structures – such as advisory boards – in which case there is a better chance of their opinions and concerns forming a part of the decision. Children may also be a part of joint decision making structures where children are an integral part of the decision making process. In this set up children have optimum impact.

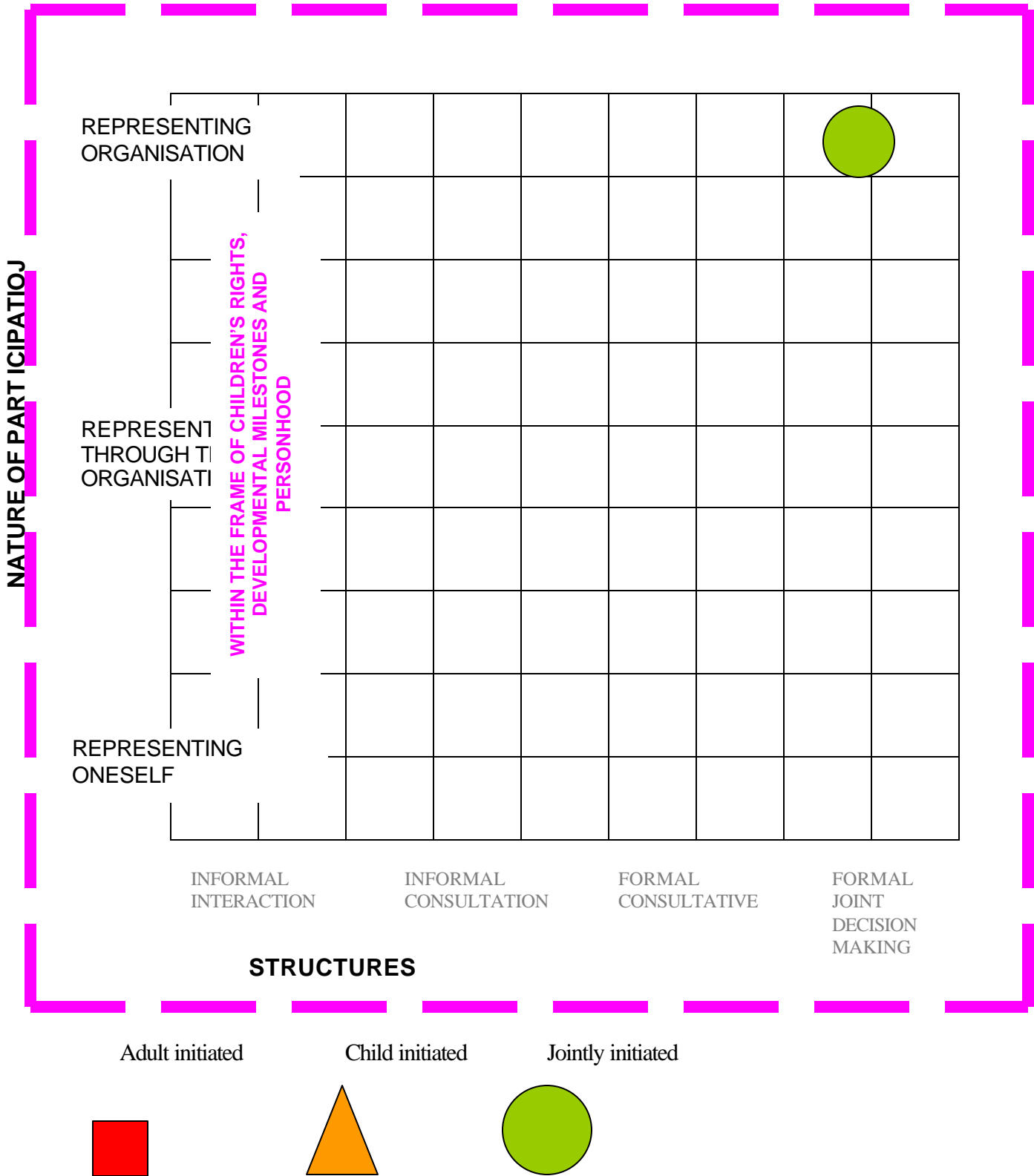
Their contribution becomes most potent when they are using formal structures and spaces as representatives of their organisations and it is in this form and level of participation that they can most significantly contribute to policy level decision making processes.

Children's organisations and movements have multiple and unique histories. Their birth, evolution and maturity may take on different paths based on the context in which children function, on the issues they wish to address, on their ideological frame and vision.

The mechanisms for empowerment and the structures for participation should be created at all levels of decision-making from home to local governance. Only then will education become relevant to the lives of marginalised children and enable them to use this newfound knowledge to transform their lives and their schools. Crucial to this process are the need for structures and forums where children can participate in an organised and meaningful way. These structure need to apply to all the arenas of a child.

Children belonging to organisations, unions and movements in several parts of the world have begun to quite definitively define their own paradigm of development and reshape the world closer to their vision. They have made significant contributions to policies and programmes resulting in interventions that are (probably for the first time) appropriate and sustainable. They have questioned our perspectives and forced us to change.

LEVELS OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION



The right of children to organise and participate in decisions regarding themselves does not mean that they have all the answers, nor does it mean that we, as adults, are absolved of our responsibilities towards our children. It is

Without organised pressure, without coordinated effort and a commitment to uphold our participation rights, no doors will open for us.

Delegates of The First International Meeting of Working Children, Kundapura, 1996

only giving them the first step towards being able to defend themselves and reshape their future. We must also be prepared for the fact that children will say things we do not necessarily agree with, they will ask embarrassing questions for which we do not have ready answers and they will disagree on the stands they take based on the differing realities they face. But we must be willing to accept this. The concerns of working children need to be put on the agenda and discussed. Their questions must be answered and only if we accept this challenge will we be any closer to finding solutions that work.

Personhood, child development and children's rights:

Their engagement among themselves and with adults has to be seen within three important frameworks by those of us who wish to initiate or enhance children's participation. We need to recognise and respect the personhood of children, have knowledge about child development and understand and internalise children's rights as a key principle.

Getting to know a child, as an individual in her/his own right is not easy to achieve. On first meeting a child, there are several factors, which influence the understanding of that child. More often than not, bias and social stereotyping influence this understanding.

Often children are categorised by the way policy and programmes are designed. Children categorised as one constituency may actually have diverse needs. For instance 'working children' or 'children in bondage'. While planning interventions, all children of one 'category' may be assumed to have common characteristics – such as 'all working children are voiceless' or 'all children in bondage are ignorant'.

The assumption is that children within a category are homogeneous. As a result the individual characteristics of each child, their individual strengths, their specific concerns and interests get overlooked.

Often children end up conforming to these descriptions of themselves. For instance, a girl may see herself as more dis-empowered than her male counterparts and a ***Harijan***⁵ boy may think of himself as down trodden. While this

⁵ A social lower caste in the Indian caste hierarchy

may be true within the existing socio-economic and cultural situation of that child, these perceptions cannot be allowed to undermine the 'inner character and qualities of the child'. It is this inner character of a child which defines her/his individuality and personality.

Many of our interventions fail because we do not take into consideration each individual child and tailor our responses to cater to them. Further we do not enable children to recognise their inherent strengths so that they may build on these and use them to transform their situations.

In order to do this we need to find ways to reach the inner child and assist children to recognise their strengths and assist them to overcome their shortcomings. It is critical to build relationships with children that are based on mutual trust, affection and most of all respect. Only then will we be better equipped to constantly question, challenge and change the stereotypes and prejudices surrounding children.

When children were drafting their definition of 'Work we can and cannot do'⁶ they initially felt that many forms of that they were performing were actually acceptable; the reason being, that were able to do it. It is only when they examined the same work within the perspective of their rights and more importantly, their developmental milestones that they began to distinguish between work that was acceptable and unacceptable.

There is a distinct difference between children's perceived needs and their rights and we adults often confuse our perceptions of children's needs with children's rights.

Children's reasons for participation and protagonism:

Children's participation: Participation is a natural instinct. From the moment they are born, children begin to participate. They participate in order to communicate and to establish links with their environment. They participate in order to gain an identity and a membership in the community. They find meaning in their lives through their participation. Gradually, through their participation, they intervene in their external environments.

Children's protagonism: The spiral of Children's Protagonism⁷ illustrates the reasons for children's protagonism and was arrived at based on the history and evolution of the working children's movements from around the world.

⁶ 'Work we can and cannot do', a document by Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayat, 1999.

⁷ Conceived by the Concerned for Working Children 1995.

For survival:

For children who are in difficult circumstances, marginalised and oppressed, their first and foremost need is that of survival, obtaining basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter and the livelihood to get these.

To end discrimination:

Once basic needs are met the need to end discrimination would become important. For example, working children would demand equal pay for equal work, etc.

For positive discrimination:

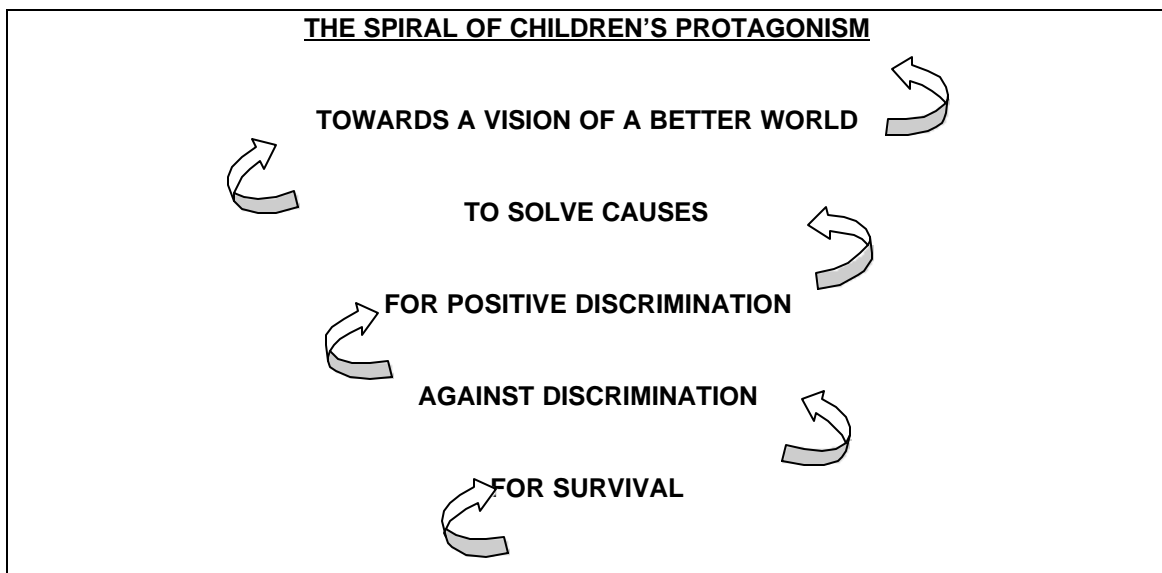
Once the above is accomplished the next step would be to demand and access rights that are due to them as children. For example, working children would demand that they work fewer hours than adults do and have access to quality education in their free time that is compatible to the formal system and appropriate to their needs.

To solve causes:

The solving of causes or the redefining of structures that oppress and marginalise children would be their next area of concern. For example, eradicating poverty, strengthening the services available to children and increasing the employment opportunities for the adults in their communities. This would also include the participation of children in governance.

To realise a vision of a new world:

And finally children would like to intervene in reshaping society closer to their vision of the world they would like to live in. This would demand that adults enter into a democratic partnership with them.



Forms of children's participation:

Children's participation can take numerous forms. Thousands of children are members of Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayats. They demonstrate participation in so many new and different ways. Ways that we adults sometimes fail to notice or recognise. The fact that a child has walked 7 kilometres to a meeting, the fact that she had to work harder and quicker to finish her household chores, the fact that he had to bring along his baby sister and mind her – these are all acts of participation – even if at the meeting the child may seem quiet or less vocal than other children. It is an act of solidarity, an act of belonging and commitment to the group and most of all a personal contribution to a larger cause. Participation therefore is not restricted to meetings or formal platforms.

Arenas: Each child is a complex individual with a unique social, cultural, political, social, environmental and spiritual identity. This identity is critical to the child and yet a dynamic one, continuously transforming through interactions with the external world as well as through internal reflections.

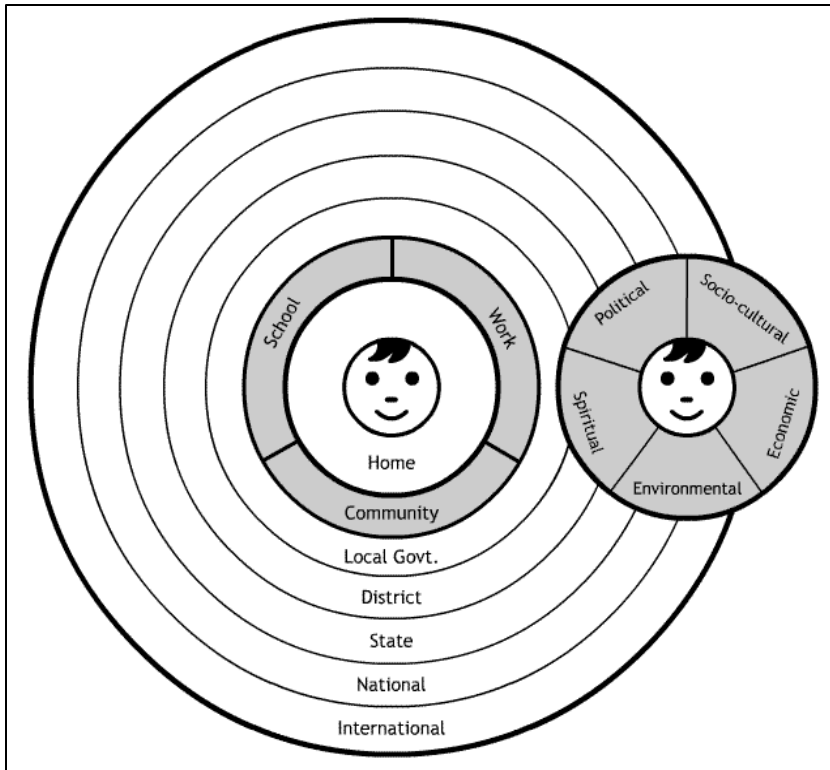
Children constantly interact with other children and adults in a wide range of arenas. Starting with their respective families and going up to the international forums, children can and sometimes do interact and influence processes.

Children who seek to participate encounter many obstacles, within their own homes and outside. They have to constantly negotiate in order to make time and space for themselves.

We should also remember that when a child participates in a platform or forum that is visible to us adults, such as conferences, that child has probably negotiated at several levels, home, work, school, community, peers, etc. in order to be there. This would mean participation in all these arenas. Our responsibility as adult facilitators is to enable and equip children to handle this.

Then we need to create the structures for participation so that children may use this to reduce the pressures on them and release them from exploitation. It is only through such participation that the state can be made accountable. This participation in political space by children will also enable other marginalised groups such as women; tribal communities etc. to change their immediate situations, and to strengthen and redefine our democracy.

CWC works with children who work and we cover about 20,000 children in 5 districts in Karnataka. We are planning to upscale to 50 Panchayats and 6 urban centres in the next five years. Our project is called **Makkala Toofan** and is basically a three to five year intervention in a given Panchayat or urban centre.



The aim is to ensure in the first phase that Panchayats are child labour free⁸ and the second phase is to ensure that the Panchayats are child rights friendly.

The children we work with wanted all the children of an area or village to come together. With our help they set up **'Makkala Panchayats'** or children's local governments in five

districts of Karnataka, a State in South India. All the children of a **'Panchayat'** elect a parallel children's government.

This election is held by the formal government administration and the secretary of the adult Panchayat acts as the secretary of the children's Panchayat. A Task Force that is chaired by the District Minister links the adult and children's Panchayats.

The children of these villages have chosen a children's friend or **'Makkala Mitra'** for each village. These people act a bit like children's Ombudspersons, protecting the rights of children and intervening on their request. As a result of this, **'Panchayats'**⁹ are able to not only declare themselves child labour free but also

⁸ Child labour-free means:-

- No children have to do work that is detrimental to their normal growth and development
- No children migrate from the Panchayat for employment
- All children in the Panchayat get an education that is appropriate to them and compatible to the formal system

⁹ Panchayat is the lowest level of administration in the system of local government. The term Panchayat refers to both the geographical and administrative units, as well as the elected body, which acts as the local council. A Panchayat is composed of a cluster of villages and several Panchayats constitute a taluk.

child friendly. This programme '**Makkala Toofan**¹⁰' or children's typhoon has enabled systemic changes that formalise political space for children.

Through their organised participation in local governance these children obtain an identity that children of this age group desperately require according to the stages of their development. They make the state accountable through their participation in political structures. This participation in political space by children also enables other marginalised groups such as women, ethnic groups, etc. to change their immediate situation and strengthen and redefine democracy.

We have been able to influence our local governments and are involved in planning for our villages. Now we have found solutions that did not seem possible when we did not have our own organisation and link structures.

Nagaraj Kolkere, Founder President
Bhima Sangha, 1996

Thousands of children are now participating in the governance of their villages. Adults that were traditionally feudal, patriarchal and gender insensitive have become the advocates for Children's Rights. Many of them do not even know about the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They see a value in the active and equal participation of children as they have seen this translated into overall benefit for the whole community.

Role of adults:

The Ladder of Participation by Roger Hart¹¹ is often used to represent levels of children's participation. However what it depicts are not levels of children's participation but the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation. It denotes the control and influence adults have over the process of children's participation. It also indicates adult responses to children's participation.

The term 'Ladder' is a misnomer as it implies a sequence, where as in reality one level may not necessarily lead to the next level; for instance, manipulation of children may not lead to children being used as decoration as a natural next step. If we take it that Roger Hart depicts a wide spectrum of scenarios of adult roles viz a viz children's participation that range from the negative to the positive, we suggest a modified version of the same as follows:

1. Active resistance: There are adults who actively resist children's participation. These adults belong to several categories. Some of them feel that children should not be burdened with participation. Some believe that children do not have the capacity to participate and hence cannot make informed choices. Some hold the view that children are very easy to manipulate and hence their

¹⁰ This is a programme of comprehensive development with primary focus on the empowerment of children. It aims at enabling children to play a proactive role in decision-making and governance

¹¹ 'Children's participation - From Tokenism to Citizenship', Roger Hart, UNICEF, 1992
The Concerned for Working Children, January 2002

participation may be used only to further adult agendas. Some adults in this category take very strong positions against children's participation and actually mobilise support and lobby against it. They do so because they are very aware of the power of children's participation and hence do not want to forfeit their power.

2. Hindrance: There are adults who hinder children's participation. Some of them may be against children's participation and they may come in the way of children's participation either overtly or covertly. They block opportunities for children and discourage children from participating. There are others in this category that may voice their support to children's participation, but the manner in which they interact with children may actually hinder children's participation. They may intentionally or unintentionally undermine the ability of children and may end up making children feel inadequate and reluctant to participate.

3. Manipulation: There are adults who manipulate children. Some adults in this scenario use children to further their own agendas. They may coach children to voice what they want or cleverly interpret what children say/do to suit their own interests. Sometimes this manipulation is very obvious, yet often it may be quite subtle – and may be carried out in ways children find very difficult to notice, let alone counter.

There are other adults who may manipulate children in order to 'get the best performance' out of them – and according to the adults, this may be done in the best interest of the child. Sometimes manipulation takes on emotional overtones as children often have emotional ties with the adults they interact with closely.

Manipulation is a very subtle and sensitive area. This critique has been often used to discredit children's participation. Even the best child facilitators could end up manipulating children unintentionally and unconsciously. The only way to guard against this is to be constantly vigilant.

4. Decoration: There are adults who treat children more or less like decorative objects, where they are expected to basically add colour to the proceedings. Children are called to present bouquets or sing songs – and not much is made of their presence.

5. Tokenism: There are adults who bring in children to take mileage from their presence and pretend that children have been given opportunities to participate. The adults may not manipulate children to speak on their behalf, yet they do 'use' the presence of children to be counted as 'advocates of children's rights' and to be politically correct.

6. Tolerance: There are adults who bear with the notion of children's participation as some one higher up (such as a donor agency) thinks it is important. In some cases, children themselves may have demanded to be

listened to. Adults then go through some consultative exercises with children but do not give any value or credit to the process or the outcome.

7. Indulgence: There are adults who find children's participation 'cute' and 'interesting' and are willing to provide limited spaces for children to voice their opinions. They keep prompting children to speak up and try to keep the environment friendly. They may listen to the opinions expressed by children with interest, but may not follow them up with seriousness. These are mostly one time events and very little comes out of such 'participation'.

8. Children assigned but informed: There are adults who work with children with some seriousness. The adults in this category decide on what needs to be done, but keep children well informed. They encourage children to be actively involved in the activities. They will guide children to implement the task, but do not expect children to input into the larger design of the process.

9. Children consulted and informed: Some adults believe in consulting children and keeping them involved. The adults take the lead role but inform the children about the situation and seek their opinion. They try to give children a sense of ownership over some aspects of the process, but under their supervision. The adults are still in control over the process, but they keep it flexible to incorporate the suggestions and concerns of the children.

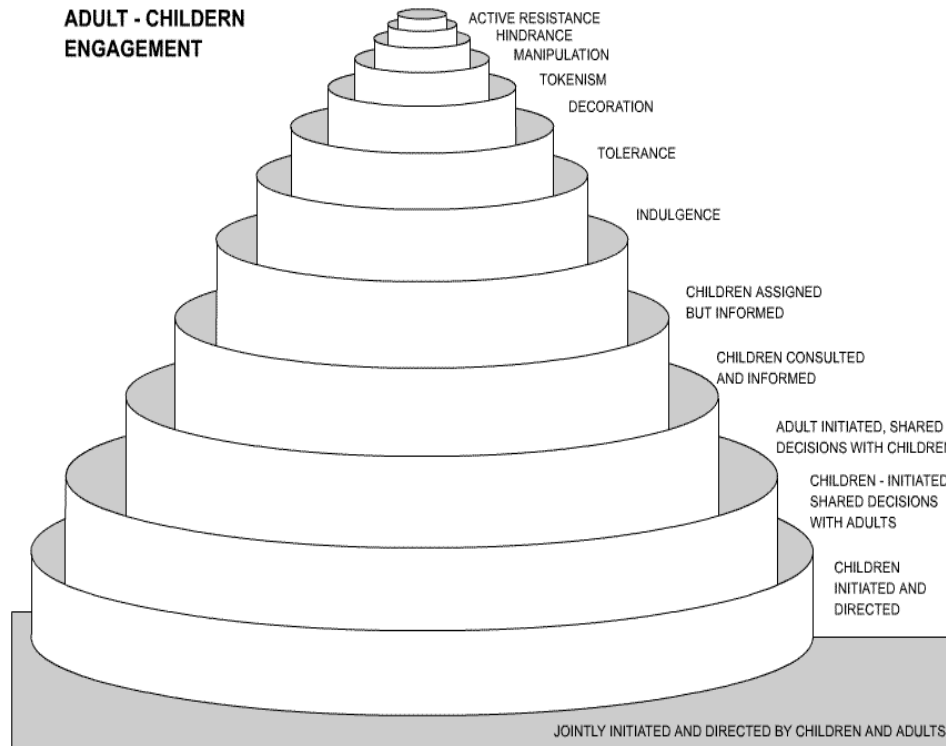
10. Adult initiated, shared decisions with children: There are adults who initiate a process or a programme, but are clearly willing to share the decision making space with the children. They see it as a collaborative interaction. Even though initiated by them, they make it a joint effort. Here too children and adults may take on different roles, yet those roles are defined by mutual consent.

11. Children – initiated, shared decisions with adults: There are children and their organisations that call the first shot, and invite adults to collaborate with them. Children ensure that adults are jointly involved in deciding what needs to be done and share the ownership of the process and the outcome. Within the collaboration, children and adults may take on different roles, yet those roles are defined by mutual consent.

12. Children initiated and directed: There are children and their organisations that are in total control and they may or may not involve the adults. If they do decide to involve the adults, they will work out the framework in which the adults are to participate. Children will continue to keep the process under their control and will have the total ownership of the process and the outcome.

13. Jointly initiated and directed by children and adults: There are adults and children who have developed a partnership and they jointly initiate and direct the processes. They have joint ownership of the idea, the process and the outcome. They may play different roles, based on mutual consent. This relationship is

possible only when both the adults and children are empowered and are able to pool their respective strengths to achieve a common objective, in partnership with each other.



These roles neither are watertight compartments nor are they purely black or white scenarios. Thirteen of them have been spelt out, yet there is a wide range of shades between them. We have seen adults play all these roles sometimes intentionally or unintentionally. It is possible that the same group of adults play one or several of these roles with the same group of children or different groups of children at different times.

But in situations where children have control over their own spaces and participation, they are in a position to negotiate with adults from a point of strength. They can then actively determine the roles each of them take on in a given situation. It is this, which actually determines the level of children's participation.

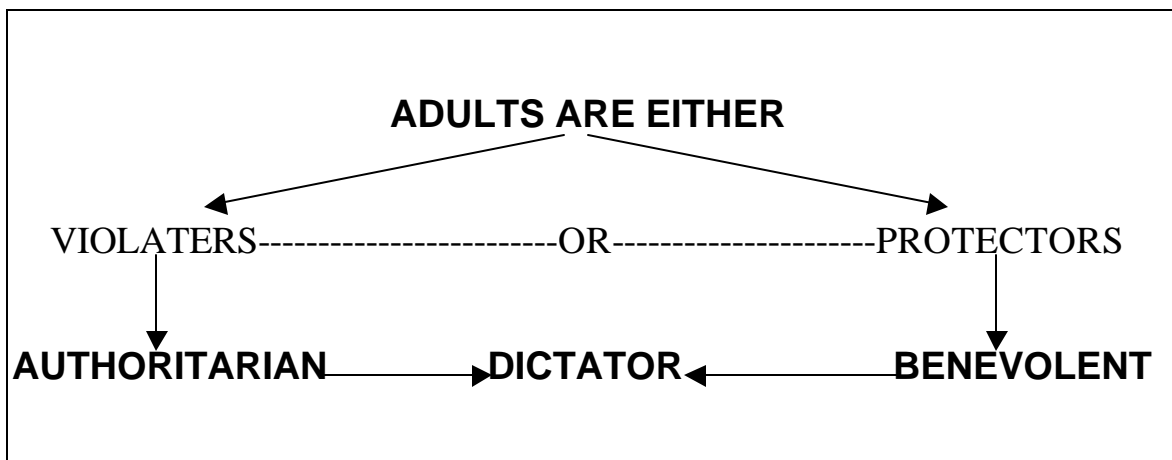
There are some who argue that the responsibility or duties of adults decrease with children's participation. This however is not true. There is actually a relationship of direct proportion between children's participation and adult responsibility. An example we often use is that of a pet dog. Keeping the dog shut in a kennel, putting the dog on a leash and allowing the dog to roam free implies different degrees of responsibility on the part of the caregiver. Keeping a dog in a kennel requires very little from the care giver, where as allowing the dog

to roam free requires the care giver to enable the dog to cross a street, protect itself and find its way home, provide a safe environment, among other things. In all three cases the caregiver is providing for and protecting the pet, but in the third case there is freedom and participation. When these scenarios are translated for children, caregivers often argue that restrictions imposed, especially with respect to girls, are for their protection.

In Partnership with Children:

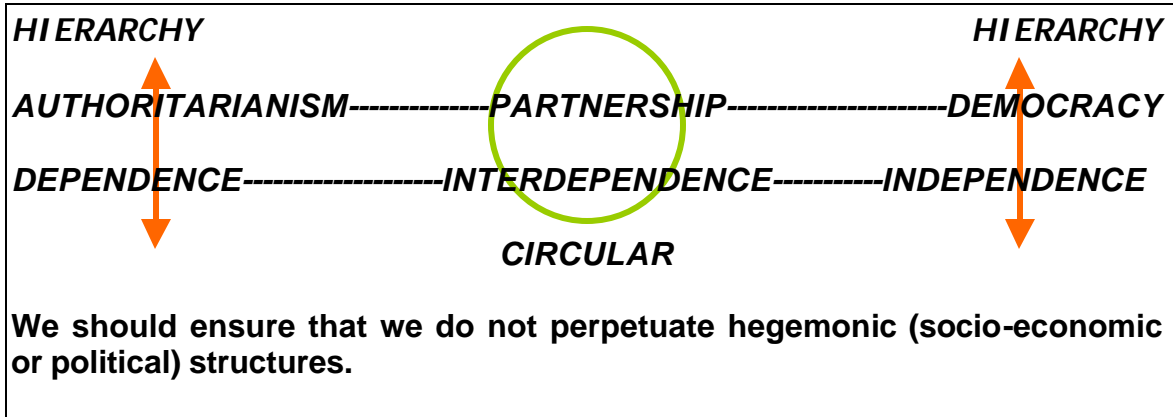
Children's right to participation is a new concept to both adults and children. This is a difficult concept to understand and more difficult to practice, as both adults and children are not normally used to this. The existing relationship we (adults) have with children normally does not allow for their active and equal participation. At present, adults are in total control. We reserve the right to advocate, intervene and decide on behalf of children. We also have socialised children to 'listen to' adults. This absolute control also gives us the possibility to abuse children. Children should have the right and the ability to resist this. It is only then that adults will be accountable for their actions.

So first of all we need to examine the nature of the relationship that we now have with children.



If we recognise children's right to participation the nature of our relationship with children will have to dramatically change. It will have to change in many ways. First it will have to change from one of either independence or dependence to one of interdependence. Secondly it will have to be a participatory relationship that is bottom up and not hierarchical or top down.

We also need to ensure that we do not perpetuate existing hegemonic structures and practices. This relationship will have to be based on democratic principles and processes.



This new partnership built on a foundation of participation will have to be based on democratic principles. Some of the elements that determine the true nature of this partnership are given below:

SOME ELEMENTS OF PARTNERSHIP

- **OPENESS**
- **RESPECT AND TRUST ON THE PART OF BOTH**
- **FREEDOM TO EXPRESS ONESELF**
- **SENSITIVITY**
- **AFFECTION**
- **COMMITMENT**
- **UNDERSTANDING**
- **MUTUAL SUPPORT**
- **EMPOWERING**
- **BASED ON FRIENDSHIP**
- **BASED ON NEGOTIATION**
- **FLEXIBLE**
- **ONE OF SHARING**
- **MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY**
- **SHARING BOTH RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES**
- **JOYFUL**
- **AGREEING TO DISAGREE SOMETIMES**
- **CHALLENGING**
- **ACCEPTING OF EACH OTHER'S REALITY**
- **SHARED VISION**
- **BASED ON LISTENING TO EACH OTHER**
- **NOT MANIPULATIVE**

The nature of a child centred partnership:

This partnership will have to be based on negotiations between the adult and the child. The adult may set the frame for this relationship based on two criteria, one the development needs of the child and the rights of the child. This will be based on approximations.

This frame has to be honestly negotiated with the child and mutually agreed upon. We should be careful not to manufacture consent. However, we must be prepared for the fact that as the child develops s/he **will** question, challenge and dismantle this frame. The role we have to play, as adults, is to prepare for this eventuality and gently put a larger, more challenging frame in place. Again the process of negotiation and challenging will be repeated.

In the initial stages the frames are set with the concerns of the child as primary and central. This will determine that all our actions are child focused and child centred. The negotiation therefore between the child and us is based on our perception of what is good for the child and their perception of what is good for them.

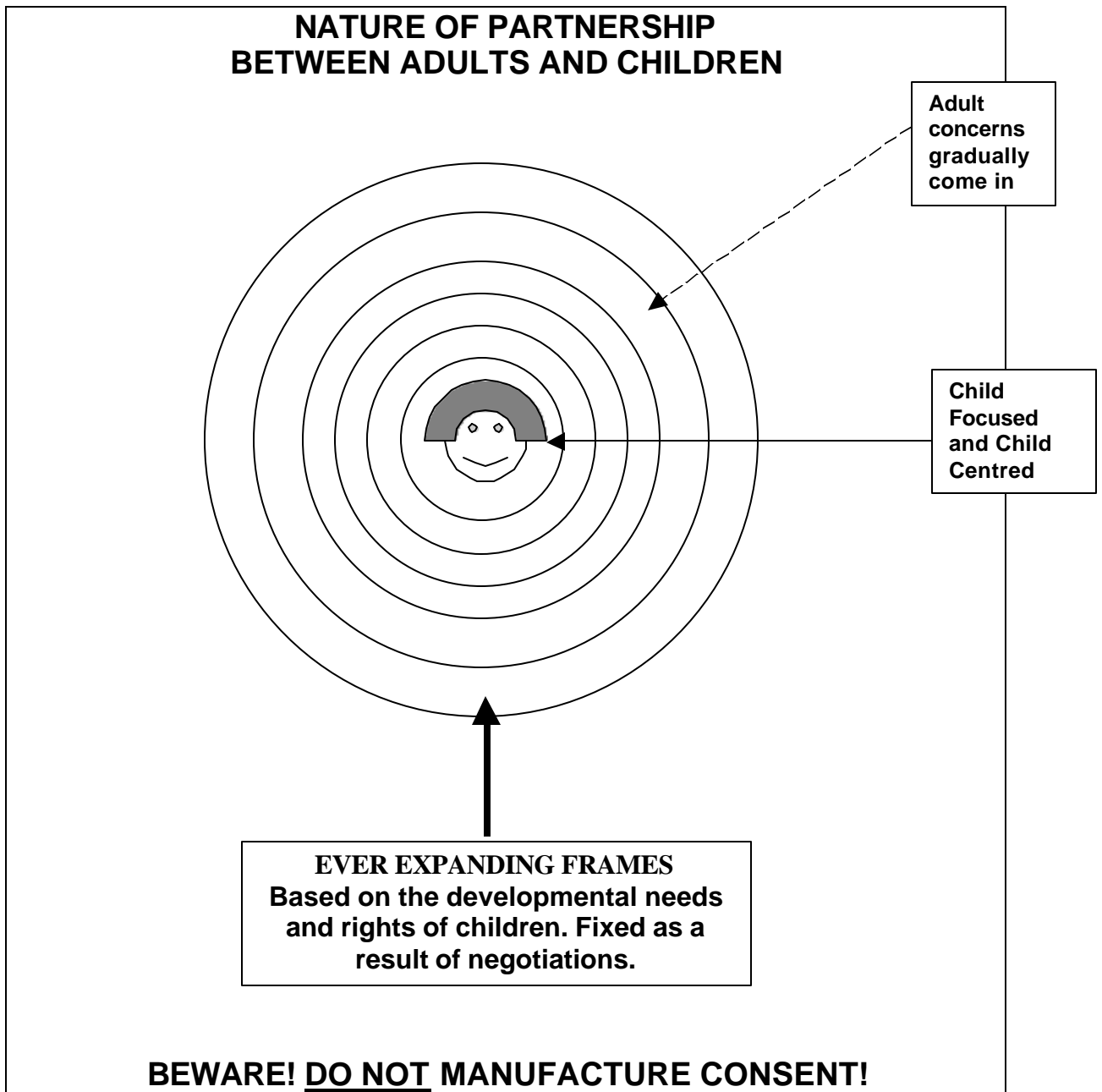
It is only gradually that our concerns can be brought into this equation. As the child grows and develops it is healthy for the child to recognise and respect our concerns and our needs as well.

We have to recognise the importance of the frame. We all need frameworks within which to function even if these frames are to be broken down and replaced. In fact that is one of the functions of the frame. A challenge to work towards and surmount. But frames are necessary as they give us a sense of safety while we need it. The total lack of a frame would lead to anarchy and loss of direction.

The diagram below illustrates the ever-expanding frames. This is akin to a snake that regularly sheds its skin. The new skin is always underneath, ready to protect the snake.

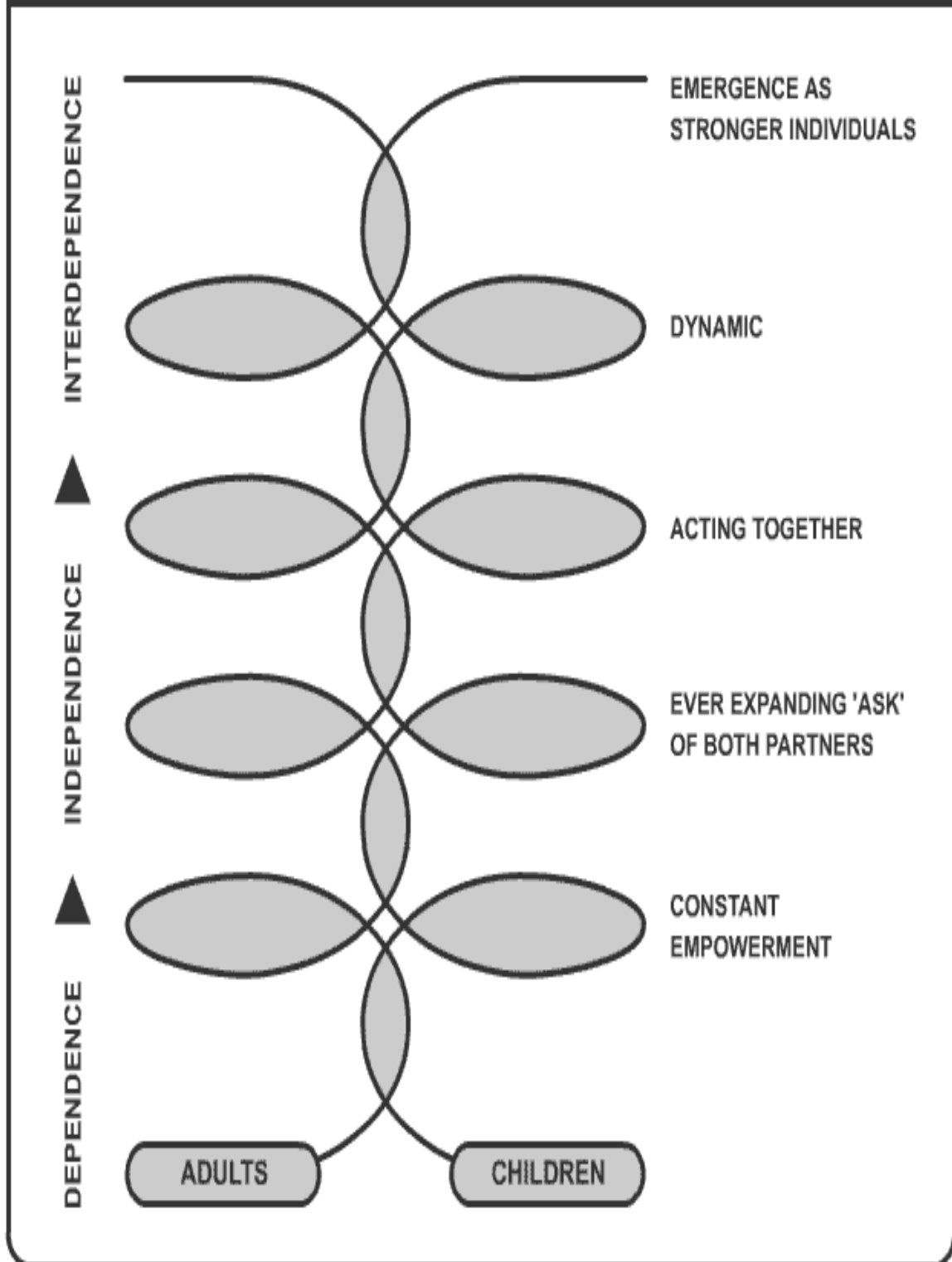
The most important things to remember are:

- An approximation based on the developmental needs of the child and the rights of the child should determine our conceptualisation of the frame.
- Negotiation must be the basis for fixing this frame.
- These frames are meant to be broken and replaced. We must be prepared for conceptualising ever enlarging frames.
- The child's concerns are primary; our concerns can only enter into the equation gradually.
- We have to be careful not to manufacture consent.



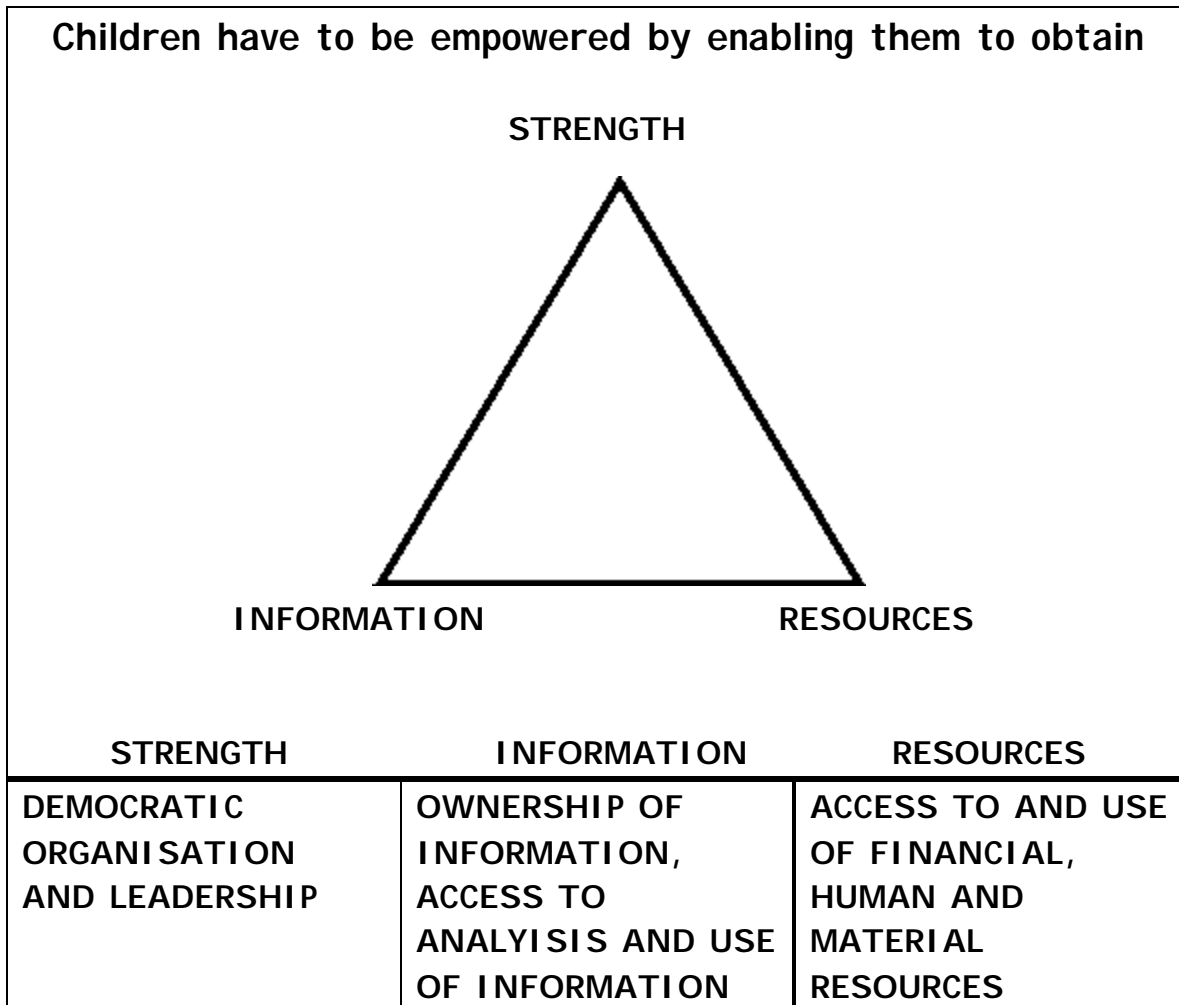
For those of us who work with children it is easy to 'feel sorry for them', 'care for them', 'even love them' but to make the leap to 'respecting them' seems difficult. The word 'respect' means so much more. It means respecting the child's situation, perceptions, attitudes, ambitions, reasoning and needs. It means listening to the child and really hearing what the child is saying even when the child's means of communication may not be only words. Though this requires a mindset or major shift in paradigm it also requires a knowledge base and a set of skills and tools that make one proficient at this.

THE SPIRAL OF PARTNERSHIP



Empowerment of Children:

Our role would be to enable children to occupy and use decision-making spaces effectively to change structures and programmes to those that improve the quality of their lives and that of their communities. To do this, the children need to gain strength through collective action, own and use information and be able to access and utilise human and material resources.



We need to prepare ourselves for this new role. We need to provide children with the knowledge and skills to organise themselves, access information and resources and understand structures, be they political, socio-cultural or economic.

Capacity building for adult facilitators:

For adults, the most important starting point is to view children as holders of rights. This requires a paradigm shift and it challenges us to redefine our relationship with children. It is also important for us to equip ourselves with a sound body of knowledge regarding personhood of children and their developmental milestones. These form the basis on which facilitation skills may be acquired to enable children to attain their full potential as protagonists. We need to develop indicators that will give us an honest understanding of the processes we are facilitating so that we are able to create spaces where both adults and children can become empowered.

The rights and responsibilities of children and adults:

The determining of rights and responsibilities of children and adults within a partnership is an issue that requires inquiry and debate. Not much work has been done in this area and this gap has led to simplistic arguments about balancing children's rights with equal responsibilities.

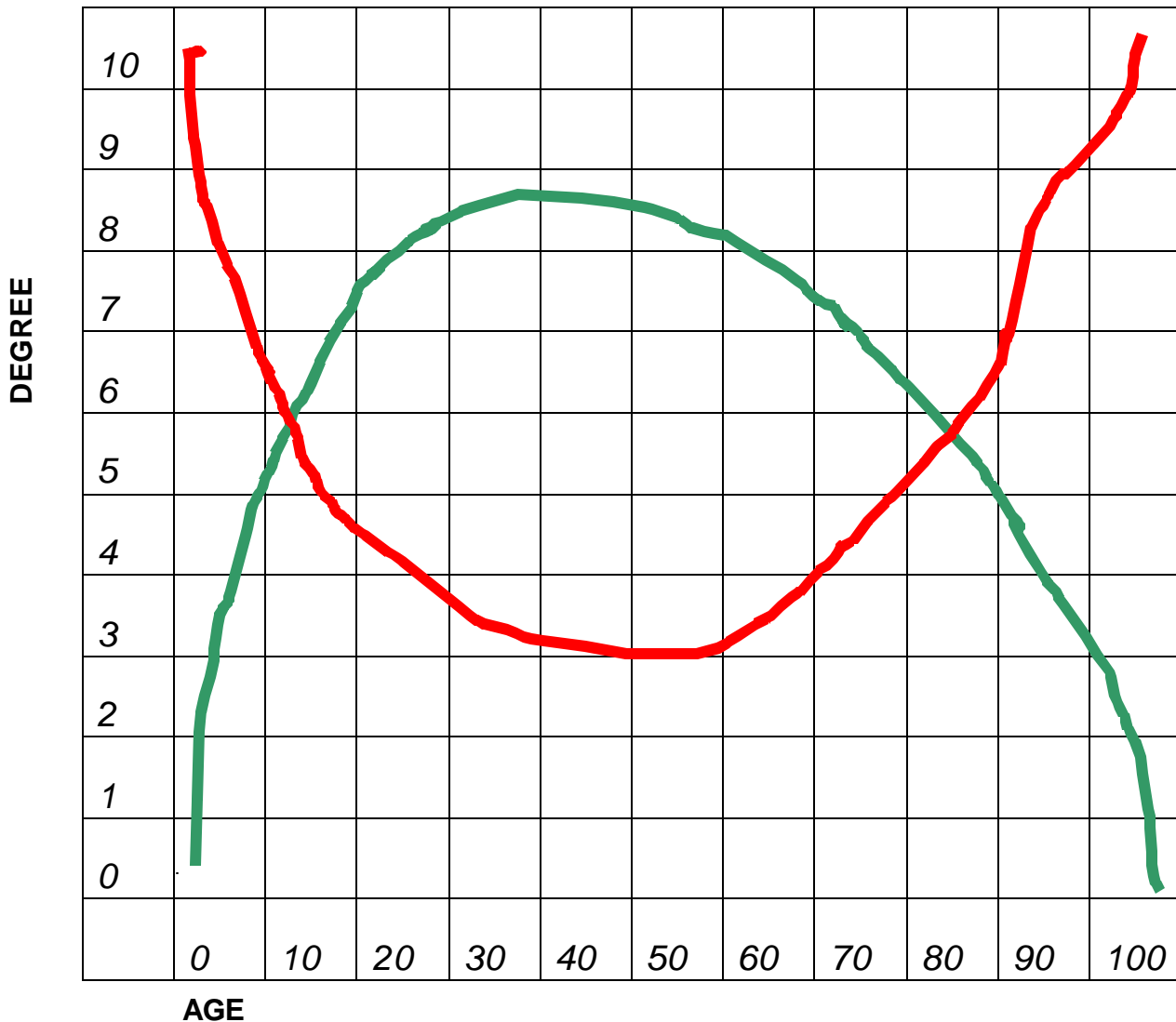
Children's participation does not mean the abdication of adult responsibility. When children's participation is low or nil, adult responsibility is also low or nil. There is no accountability by adults or children. However, as children's participation increases, adult responsibility also increases in twice that proportion. It is a partnership that adults have to enter into with children, it involves adults sharing power with children, it means listening to and understanding really what children are saying and acting on the basis of a consensus. We need to prepare ourselves for this new role and we also need to provide children with the knowledge and skills to organise themselves, to access information and resources and to understand structures, be they political, socio-cultural or economic.

It is also important for adults to protect their arenas of participation, so that we do not usurp children's spaces or manipulate them.

The rights and responsibilities of adults and children are not always equally balanced. At no point in one's life are rights and responsibilities equal. Adding a right does not necessarily mean adding on a corresponding responsibility. A baby has all her rights, but practically no responsibilities. Similarly, senior citizens or mentally challenged individuals. Rights and responsibilities are determined by age and ability of the individual.

The diagram below attempts to show how rights and responsibilities are in practice – the extent of realisation – and not as it is stated in theory.

THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITY CURVE



- ❑ *The enjoyment of rights probably decreases from birth to middle age and then begins to increase again.*
- ❑ *Similarly the responsibility curve probably increases from birth to middle age and then decreases.*
- ❑ *Rights and responsibilities are never equally balanced.*

■ RIGHTS ■ RESPONSIBILITIES

Conclusion:

To participate is a natural instinct. It is also natural to protect one's space and sometimes even prevent others from sharing it.

Children are attempting to participate all the time. There are many groups of children especially working children's unions and movements that have demanded and occupied space to participate, including political space.

We the adults have a choice. To be either the facilitators and partners in this struggle of our children or to continue to hinder it. If we chose to be the former, the 'learning' that we have to undergo is rigorous and complex. The territory is largely uncharted and we learn more through our mistakes than our successes. We have to develop sound theory and this can be done only by examining **in-depth** the experience and knowledge base that already exists.

This document is a small contribution to this process.