

Children's Rights and the Building Of Democracy: A Dialogue on the International Movement for Children's Participation

Roger Hart and Michael Schwab

Michael: You've been working on children's participation for many years now, and you've been all over the world meeting groups of kids who are working together to improve their own conditions. In your writing, you give considerable emphasis to the value of this work in democratizing children. Would you say that most of the people you've met think of their programs that way?

Roger: Many of the programs I've observed are in the "developing world" — I prefer to call it "the South" — and most of them make a link between the way they work and the way they feel their society should be developing — democratically. In the U.S., it's different. We have such an orthodox and narrow view of what it means to be democratic that many of the more progressive groups I know would not want to be associated with any commonly understood use of the term democracy! For example, as we speak, all over the country, kids are doing mock elections, pretending to be President Clinton and Vice President Gore or their challengers; what a wasted opportunity. They should be having elections about things that they know lots about, namely, their own lives and the lives of their schools, real democracy. That's what they do in the "New Schools" of Colombia, for example. This mock democracy, mock elections, it's a way of playing safe, to avoid getting into some of the tricky and morally challenging issues of local politics that one faces in genuine democratic process. I suppose much of the problem is that in the U.S., we have come to think of democracy as electoral representation. While the nation loudly proclaims itself as a democratic model for

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the world, it has in fact lost touch with its democratic origins — with the idea of each person having a voice.

Michael: “Real Democracy,” that’s an interesting theme. There are projects in quite a few countries that might qualify as really democratic. You mention the New Schools in Colombia, and I want to discuss those with you. But first, how would you characterize this broader democratic movement with children?

Roger: Well, most of what I’ve learned has been through visiting nongovernment organizations who are working with what UNICEF calls “children in especially difficult circumstances.” That’s a euphemism for a diversity of children: those who are separated from their families, who are living or working on streets, or exploited in child labor, in prostitution, or perhaps living in red light districts as children of prostitutes, and so on. The term also includes children in war-torn situations, though I have not visited any of these programs. Many of these children now work with adult facilitators and *animators* on their rights and learn to have a voice. As a result, there is probably a much higher percentage of those kinds of children learning about rights and democratic skills than of children living in stable and economically viable families.

In many countries, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* has become a very important organizing tool for facilitators working with children who live in difficult circumstances. Unfortunately, most other children are not learning about it. In the U.S., of course, the Convention is not even being used with children in difficult circumstances, because it has not been ratified in the U.S. and most facilitators and teachers don’t even know about it. As you know, the U.S. is the only major country that hasn’t ratified the Convention. In contrast, in countries such as Colombia, Brazil, and the Philippines, it has been a major tool for improving children’s lives, and the children seem to be a major focus of debates about democratization. Within the children’s movements in those countries, the Convention is not only a powerful instrument for the advocates of children, but also for children themselves.

Michael: What did you find in Brazil?

Roger: Well, Brazil is I think the example *par excellence*. There is a very strong popular movement there for the education and empowerment of the poor, which developed under the years of dictatorship mostly among radical educators, many of whom were associated with the Church. One important educational theorist whom many North Americans are familiar with was Paulo Freire, though there were other writers who have not been translated. During the dictatorship, many democratic poor communities were quietly working on local direct democracy, so after Brazil declared itself a democracy in 1989, there were a lot of people who were ready. I wrote in the UNICEF essay, “Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship,” about how street workers and groups of street working children came from all over Brazil to Brasilia to have their voices heard by congressmen as the new constitution was being debated.

Article 12

1. 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.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

- a. For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or
- b. For the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.

Article 14

1. States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

2. States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Michael: It sounds the way you've put it that the initiative was coming from adults in that particular case, although they found children ready and willing.

Roger: Well, yes, adult facilitators play an important role in animating children and presenting opportunities to them. But we must also remember that children who make their living on the streets often have a lot of ability to think and act independently. What they often need is more skill in how to cooperate with one another. Nevertheless, they have community and they've found ways of helping each other survive on the street. When you meet these kids, they often seem very strong and forthright. As important as it is to work with these children, it is saddening to learn that there are so many more children living in difficult

circumstances who are hidden from view and have no voice at all: children in various kinds of industrial slavery and girls in domestic slavery all over the world.

It is wonderful to walk alongside a good street worker and see how they allow children to come to them. It often begins with something like — “Do you want to come and join us? We do some fun things.” From this, they slowly bring them into a culture where they share more. It is a fascinating process. The different ways street workers do it is an interesting story in itself. Some of the best street workers are a composite of cultural anthropologist, child psychologist, and brother or sister. From them, children discover how they can improve their own lives and work with others to improve their collective lives. After a while, they begin to see that there’s even a chance for them to work for the lives of other kids like themselves. That’s where, again, the pedagogy of people like Freire is so important. Freire is very clear about how and when children are pulling themselves out of their condition; they must always be reminded by the adult facilitators to look back at the ones they’re leaving behind. Otherwise, the oppressed become the oppressors. That’s the way Freire puts it, and that’s the way most street workers I have met in Brazil think of it.

Michael: You make it sound like a national movement.

Roger: It is a national movement, part of a popular political movement, though I should admit that I have mainly visited the nongovernment organizations identified by UNICEF, so I have a biased view. No doubt it would look less like a national movement if I saw a cross-section of NGOs.

Michael: Is the situation similar in the Philippines?

Roger: There are some important similarities between the two countries. They’ve both got local street workers who are constantly trying to improve their own democratic practice with their groups, and one of the ways they both do this is through exchange between street workers. They meet and discuss process. They also actually switch roles; for two or three weeks they work in each other’s organizations. That’s an important role that the NGO coalitions offer. Communication can make a big difference. There has also been considerable correspondence and exchanges of experience between Brazil and the Philippines in their work with children in difficult circumstances. For example, Teresita Silva, who coordinates a network of NGOs in Manila, visited Brazil a number of times to learn from Brazil and brought the lessons back. She also fostered exchanges between the two countries.

There is more and more of that South-South exchange going on now with people learning from one another. As a result, the Philippines, like Brazil has local municipal-level meetings between elected child representatives of the different street children’s groups who go on to island level and then national meetings of street and working children. Every year there is a National Congress of Street and Working Children in Manila that meets for a week and presents issues that have come from their peers at each of their small groups. They

ultimately decide upon two or three issues that the children bring to the Philippine Congress. That model is similar to the one in Brazil.

Michael: Can you give an example of issues either in Brazil or the Philippines that moved from the local level to the national level?

Roger: Yeah, a nice one I saw being developed through skits by the children was the problem of people taking the wrong drugs inside low-income communities. You know, a person gets up in the middle of the night and there is probably no electricity. They go to the cupboard and pull out medicine. It's in the wrong bottle because people get small amounts of medicine or they share medicines and put them in whatever bottle they've got. In this way, they take the wrong drugs and they're in trouble. There are people that are kind of swapping medicines with each other and making do. So these kids said, "This isn't fair. We need pharmacies in our communities." They made a presentation to the National Congress that resulted in new legislation for the distribution of pharmacies in low-income neighborhoods of the Philippines. Now, I haven't followed that through to see where it's gone, but this is happening at a high enough level that when these promises are made, the press of the Philippines is following it. That's a very important part of the movement. The press is working alongside the children's participation movement. That's true in Brazil, too, where children's rights issues are on the front page of the newspapers with stories of children doing things like this. It's a very exciting movement and the press is really crucial.

Michael: Do the children themselves learn how to use and work with the media?

Roger: Sometimes, but the media need awareness training on this issue — to stop them from being so damned patronizing with children. You know, they're constantly pretending, "Kids did this and kids did that," and writing it up as though kids did it all by themselves and we all know it's a lie and they do it just to make good, cute stories.

Michael: We need to educate the press about children's participation.

Roger: Yeah, it's very important for them to learn to be critical, so they understand when they see a process that is either exaggerating or not really recognizing children's genuine competencies. They don't need to exaggerate, and hence patronize, children's efforts, but rather to report it honestly and just as critically as they would adult projects.

Michael: Can you also give an example in Brazil of an issue that the kids have taken on?

Roger: Well, I've already described some of the process of children's involvement in writing the constitution of Brazil. They brought to Brasilia a critical evaluation of the *Convention on the Rights of Children* by children from all over Brazil who had been through the Convention and identified issues that were particularly important to them. One of these was the way children were forcibly removed from the streets and incarcerated. We hear so much about the right-wing killings in the North American press, but on the positive side, the police can no

longer sweep the streets clean of children. The battle is not finished, of course. It is one thing to have things in law and another to get all the judges throughout the country to follow it. There is a very strong movement in Brazil for the defense of children.

Michael: This is a movement of adults...

Roger: Yes, a movement of adults...

Michael: ...with children?

Roger: Well, yes, and that's what makes it different. It's a movement with the public. It is connected to a broader popular movement, which is a movement of the poor. It is led by advocates for children, many of whom are trained street workers and many of whom are lawyers. What they are most vigilant about is watching the judges. They watch the court cases to see how they play out, provide legal services to children, and communicate from state to state and city to city about the progress of children's rights as the Brazilian Constitution and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* are turned into law at the local level.

Michael: So it's a children's participation movement rather a children's movement?

Roger: Well, it's both: a movement for, and with, children; it also involves the press and lawyers to a great degree. So there are some important actors beyond the facilitators of children's participation. We need the lawyers and the press, too.

Michael: From what I've seen in Europe and here in the U.S., there is potentially also a lot of support among parents. Most of the children's participation in these countries is with kids living at home, often in very difficult circumstances — poverty, violence, drugs, and so on — but with at least one parent, usually the mother, living with the kids. These mothers are often very supportive of their children's involvement in positive community activity.¹ Then there are projects involving more stable families, where parents are in a position to organize themselves quite easily around the children's issues. For example, I was recently in Germany and met an adult — not a street worker, but what you would call an *animator* — who was working with a group of children on an urban planning project. This was in a small town in the Ruhrgebiet, an area that used to be heavily mined, but where the mines are now closed, and there is a lot of development going on. They are putting grass on top of the slag heaps and redesigning communities. This animator had worked with the children, using clay and various other materials, to model the kind of town they would like to live in. As the kids' ideas formulated, and the model grew, parents and neighbors got involved. They liked what the kids were proposing. What the kids were saying is, "We want the cars on the outside of town." The parents and others came to their support and said, "That's right. Why don't we do that? Why must we always have cars in the middle of town." By the time they reached the planners, they had a community-wide movement of adult and children.

Roger: Yes, in many of the projects that I've seen in developing countries, kids are catalysts for community action. When the kids aren't in families — often they

are removed from their communities — they have to first work to safeguard their own lives. In the best projects, though, these kids will quickly come to work with the larger community, as with *El Programa Muchacho Trabajador* (The National Program of Working Children) in Ecuador.²

Michael: How would you say children who are living in families and going to school can become active proponents of the Convention?

Roger: A common idea is that kids be stimulated in school programs — you know this from the health world — and be told to carry health messages home. But you take that one step further and instead of carrying one-way messages, the kids carry home issues to discuss with their parents. I would love to see that happening generally with the Convention all over the world. You know, we all act as though the Convention is something everybody's agreed on, but in fact, it is a very controversial document and to many there are large parts of it that are really unacceptable. To educate kids about the Convention and not deal with the way their parents think of it is unacceptable. We do need processes for these children who live in families to bring their families into the discourse.

Michael: You have visited the Escuelas Nuevas in Colombia, where the children are given the time and space to research community issues, to interact with the adults who are actually managing their environment, and begin to participate in making decisions. Tell us about them.

Roger: The Escuelas Nuevas in Colombia started 19 years ago in Caldas, the richest coffee grinding region in the world, where every inch is used to grow coffee. For part of the year, kids would be working long hours in the fields, and the schools were empty. It just wasn't a relevant school system. So they started from scratch with the parents to work out what a new relevant school system would look like. With the help of UNICEF and UNESCO funding, they developed a school system that not only has some of the best qualities from systems in other countries, but is also democratic. The schools were organized with the participation of children, in a representative democratic way, at every age level, beginning when they entered school at six. Community service was a fundamental part of the curriculum. In the U.S., community service is voluntary and is so often perceived as what the goody-goody kids do, rather than something fundamental to education. In the Escuelas Nuevas, each child has to help plan and organize a community project. The kids don't have textbooks in the official sense of the word; they have the kind of documents that María Espinosa describes, which are books that require kids to do research. The teachers are resource people, who help the children carry out their research; but the children are in charge of their studies. Training is very important, because to put children in charge is a very threatening transformation of a teacher's role.

Teacher training is also difficult. In Colombia, they found the best way to do it is horizontally, with teachers supporting teachers. So you set up a new Escuela Nueva, with a number of other schools around it, and the teachers all meet at the

same school once a week. They share with each other the problems about feeling disempowered now that their children have been empowered! This is a big issue — to transform a teacher-centered classroom into a child-centered one. But there have been many evaluations to show how successful this transition often is, and now many South American and African countries are building upon the “Escuelas Nuevas” model. It is wonderful to see the southern hemisphere looking at itself and learning from itself, instead of adopting ideas from the North. Now, the northern nations need to become open to learning from the South!

Most of the Escuelas Nuevas in Colombia are in rural areas. There are now a few in the city of Bogotá, and it remains to be seen how successfully they will be. What is different in a rural area is that you have got local parent support — again, the parents — and a relatively homogeneous culture: these make it easier to transform a school in radical ways.

Not only are the classes democratically organized, but the farm committee, the worm committee, and the fish farm committee are also all managed by children. They are elected in a campaign that is run like a traditional election campaign. In some schools this happens every three months!

In the Hojas Anchas school, which I visited, I asked about democratic process and it was clear that the children understand the parallel between the system at school and the one in the town. They know they are not only preparing themselves for participating as adult citizens, they are also participating right now. If they’ve got issues that really relate to the town, they bring their questions to the local *junta* (like “selectmen”) community. They will actually stand up and speak and say, “You know, we now need some more money for our fish committee, because we feel we need to dig a new pond and it requires this kind of expense.”

They organize themselves with boys and girls equal in all things. For example, in another school I met some 13- and 14-year-old boys on the school farm committee, and the president of their committee was a girl, 10 years of age. In my experience, it’s unusual for teenage boys to pick a girl as being president of their committee, but they explained to me. “The thing is that she is more experienced in this area, she’s really involved in it,” and they felt she could do the best job of bringing the boys together. It seems to me that in the schools I visited there was equal responsibility between girls and boys at all age levels in managing projects. **Michael:** This kind of ecological education that doubles as participation in community life — it’s far away from American mainstream education, or the national curriculum they now have in Britain.

Roger: It wasn’t always like that. In the United Kingdom, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, we had a different kind of government that allowed this kind of initiative to develop. It was an important phase of development for us to learn from. Much of my understanding of it comes from discussions with Colin Ward, who was a prime mover in the movement. He was the education director of the Town and Country Planning Association, and from this stronghold he was able to

establish a movement for inspiring geography and social studies teachers to become “environmental studies” teachers. He encouraged them to get kids to evaluate their community, focusing on problems that the children themselves identified. Colin argued that to become responsible citizens in the environment, children needed to observe it, critique and evaluate it, and act to change it. He expanded what had been going on in Britain in “rural studies” and “nature studies” for years, and brought it to cities. He took the idea of field work and turned it into “street work,” and took the idea of field study and turned it into “urban study.” He also took the idea of rural study centers and nature study centers and turned them into “urban study centers.”

Urban study centers became a model to involve children in investigating their environment. They were not physically based in schools, but were used by the schools. They are similar in some ways to the “alternative spaces” in Ecuador, except that children from a larger region were involved and they came as members of school groups. The environment they focused on included green spaces, but it was equally about housing, recreation, crime, and other issues of the human environment. The children had access to aerial photographs, surveying instruments, photographs, video equipment, maps — whatever they needed to document neighborhood problems that they thought needed to be investigated. Over many years, the urban study centers were able to redocument the environment, to show how the community was changing. So the urban study center model is a research effort that school teachers facilitate, but which includes the children’s point of view.

Michael: How come all this happened in Britain?

Roger: I can think of at least four reasons why children’s participation happened in community development in Britain in the 1970s. One was that British schools, at the elementary level at least, had become extremely child-centered. The elementary schools were self-consciously trying to make themselves follow the implications of developmental psychology, which said that children develop best when they are allowed to construct their own lives and learn best when they construct their own learning. It wasn’t just the upper-class schools that were progressive in this way, like in the U.S.; it was common across the country in the 1970s.

So that’s one major factor. Another one was that the government mandated public participation in planning, and one of the ways they achieved this was to allow education offices in each of the local government environmental planning departments to work directly with the schools. They could have done their school business in a traditional way, like policemen and firemen lecturing to the kids, and some of them apparently did this. But many of them did it in a more active way by involving teachers and children in research for local planning projects.

Third, it has long been a tradition in British schools to go outdoors to directly do “nature study,” and beginning in the 1960s, more broadly, “environmental

studies.” This was much less the case in the USA. The progressive schools, including those inspired by John Dewey, were about the active involvement of children and democracy *within* the school. They did not generally reach out into the larger community. They tried to do microcosms of democracy. It is interesting to note that John Dewey did not write about the environment in children’s education, whereas Friedrich Froebel, who so influenced him and other European educational philosophers, did. So there is a long tradition of kids going out into the environment and bringing their learning into the classroom that was less a part of education in the U.S.

Finally, there was the influence of the tiny Education Unit within the British Town and Country Planning Association, headed by Colin Ward. He had already written quite a lot about public participation and about people taking greater control over their own environment. He was a student of the so-called grandfather of planning, Patrick Geddes. Geddes believed in public participation in planning, and Colin Ward found a new way of achieving this, through children. The education unit of the Town and Country Planning Association saw schools, and particularly geography teachers, as a major way of improving public involvement in planning. A major instrument for achieving this was the monthly magazine, the *Bulletin for Environmental Education* (now *Streetwise*),³ which is packed with practical accounts of involving children in environmental research. Another highly effective strategy was for schools to work closely with planning officers from local government planning department, something made possible by the government mandate for public participation. Since the 1970s, many U.S. leaders have worked to involve their children in field research on the environment, but it has largely been on the “green” issues of the environmental movement; it rarely involves such important urban environmental issues as housing and recreation space planning.

Michael: And today?

Roger: The urban study center idea has been largely erased and I believe that the Conservative ideology that has reintroduced individual competition into the schools as the strategy for excellence and economic performance in the nation has eroded community research by children. We will need to wait a few years to hear again the cries of those asking how children are to become caring, cooperative, democratically skilled citizens of a civil society!

Michael: So if you take the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* seriously, it may be that children’s organizations, outside the school setting, are more likely to help children play a really democratic role in their own lives.

Roger: Yes, certainly right now in the U.K. that’s true. The people who are trying to bring the Convention forward in Britain are youth workers working with kids, mostly underprivileged kids. They are working from the same principle — which I think is the most effective way to make the Convention work — to allow children to be what the South Americans call the “protagonists of their own rights,” that is,

to let them know their rights so they can speak about them and become active for them. There are many nongovernment organizations in the U.K. that are active in promoting children's rights. One of them is called "Article 12." They have named themselves after Article 12 of the Convention. This organization is made up of young adolescents who speak out about children's rights and try to carry that message to other children. They are very self-consciously trying to get a movement going for children's voices.

Michael: Again, I'm asking myself, is this a "children's movement"? Do the kids feel some ownership of it?

Roger: When we are talking about street children in Brazil and the Philippines, yes. I think many of them feel they are part of a movement and they feel a real ownership of the issues. But most other projects I've seen around the world begin with an assumption by adults that kids should do something in particular. Once you've said that to the kids, it's already too late, you've narrowed their view. One needs to gather them together to do whatever they want — for example, to understand the Convention and act from it. That would be a valid thing for any organization that claims to be a children's organization to do, from the Boy Scouts, to a youth club, to a group of delinquents living in care. I'm thrilled to hear, for example, that the Episcopalian Church in the U.S. is now promoting the Convention with children's groups in their churches.

Michael: It is disturbing that the U.S. hasn't yet ratified the Convention. It reminds me of the *International Code on the Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes* in the 1980s, which again the U.S. did not ratify — basically because the formula manufacturers didn't like it. One of the most vocal groups working to advance the Code in the U.S. has been the church. Perhaps the same could happen with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Roger: Well, very few people know about the Convention in this country to even push for it. Those who do haven't been trying very hard because they think it's a hopeless cause, because of the power of the right wing. As a result, we have so far heard more about "parent's rights" than children's rights. My own feeling is that the participation articles of the Convention are too visionary for most parents; the U.S. has already gone so far down the road of what it thinks is permissive child rearing that anything about children having a greater voice will be seen as moving in the wrong direction. The current dominant mood seems to be in the opposite direction. The tendency is rather to bemoan the unruliness of children and to blame it on lack of discipline, a lack of moral uprightness, that can only be corrected by an increase in "the rod," or at least an increase in adult authority. This has already happened to some extent in Europe. It is a misreading of the Convention, of course, because it doesn't prescribe any reduction of adult authority. Rather, it recognizes a deeper way of achieving that authority — through mutual respect and dialogue. We've got a big uphill battle, however, because all over the world families tend to be authoritarian. In the U.S., we've got the extra problem that most adults think

that children already have too much of a voice. Actually, what they probably have is too much freedom and not enough honesty and genuine open dialogue. The distinction between authoritative and authoritarian parenting, which developmental psychologists often use, is relevant here. Unfortunately, we have much more permissive and authoritarian parenting than authoritative parenting.

Michael: Maybe American parents would find the French model for children's participation more attractive — the children's councils, which are set up to mimic the adult democratic process. In France, there is a national network of Children's and Youth Councils.⁴ The kids are often elected through the schools, but the councils function independently of the schools. They have some latitude in what issues they work on. Some have been quite successful in getting their ideas onto the agenda of the adult municipal councils in their towns. The oldest council I know of, in Schiltigheim, has been going for 20 years now, and I think there are currently something like 600 around the country, which is quite a staggering thought. They have a national association (Association National de Conseils d'Enfants et de Jeunesse), and the idea seems to be catching on in the European Community. There are councils in Germany now, and Italy, and Denmark. What is your impression of this trend?

Roger: I have only seen these councils active in Northern Italy, and I am very interested in this movement. I hope it will soon establish self-critical and comparative evaluation procedures so that we can learn what its strengths and weaknesses are. One criticism I've heard is that these councils tend to be made up of the articulate school achievers. If the prevailing school structure does not foster the open participation of all children, one cannot expect it to suddenly produce democratic representatives. Even if there are elections, they are going to be kind of fake elections if they only involve those few kids who have somehow already learned that they are the kids who are likely to be listened to; those who are already disenchanted will be excluded. Another criticism is that the councils only deal with a narrow spectrum of school issues. One of the things that so impressed me about the New Schools of Colombia is how wide a range of issues can be managed democratically with children. By making democratic involvement into a general school practice, they don't have to worry about involving only a select group of children. We need to go beyond the idea of children's councils as a special kind of activity, and hence, probably, a media event. We need to think of them as absolutely basic to the functioning of a democracy and to children's daily experience.

Michael: That is certainly something to work toward, but I'm inclined to see advantages to lesser forms of participation, too. There is a spectrum of degrees and kinds of participation. You've adapted Arnstein's ladder of participation, from tokenistic manipulation on the lowest rung of the ladder and shared decision-making with adults at the top (see Hart, 1992). Children's councils, community organizations that are led by kids, and other organizations that involve children in

some decisions, but not others, all seem to me to have their pros and cons. That is where evaluation would help us — to understand the pros and cons. Even these high profile media events, like the Children's Forums organized by the United Nations Environment Program, could be said to have their plus side. Some of the kids in our community action projects in California went to one of those international forums. They were deeply moved at meeting young people from all over the world, hearing them talk about their issues. The whole experience broadened their horizons, gave them hope and encouragement. Of course, these kids were also doing their own research in their communities — I don't know how many other participants in the conference were — so they also had the kind of everyday experience of designing and conducting community work that you're talking about.

Roger: Yes, large conferences can be vulnerable, but typically those single events — like a forum, conference, or town meeting — are based on little or no ongoing substantial participation in anything. I've observed that the child advocates and facilitators who take part in these events tend to focus on achieving democratic processes during the event, and much less so on the everyday institutional context and the processes leading up to the event. One must focus on regular functioning; then the special events will be a natural, authentic by-product rather than a token democratic aberration.

Michael: That is what you describe as happening in Brazil and the Philippines. But it is not the democracy that we have in this country, or just about any so-called democratic country that I know of.

Roger: If we had to think that what we have now is the model to follow, I wouldn't bother wasting my time! Presumably we are doing this kind of work because we believe that in the 21st century we will be developing something that looks more democratic than what we have today.

Michael: What we're talking about would mean profound changes in the way that adults behave in relation to children. It would mean acknowledging them as fully sentient beings, with their own valid experience. That's the implication of the Convention — that children, even babies, feel and see and know something about how life is, or how it ought to be, from the way we bring babies into the world, and the way parents and teachers *are* with children, to the way we design schools, cities, our whole society. We're talking about a new kind of respectful, attentive relationship.

Roger: Yes, this is a historical shift in thinking about children's development. And you know, some people think that organizations like the New Schools don't go far enough. I've talked about them glowingly, but some criticize the fact that they have an electoral process that mimics the adult one. The school has a president, a secretary, and a treasurer, and each children's committee has those three people. The elections are run and modeled after the Brazilian elections. Some people think, "We shouldn't build a representative democracy with these kids because we've all

seen how bad representative democracy is with adults. We need something better.” The director of the National Program of Working Children in Ecuador, Dolores Padilla, does not like her staff to suggest any particular electoral process to the children in her local programs. Since she does not like the ones society now has, she would rather the children came up with processes themselves. I think this would be an interesting strategy to document and evaluate. I suspect that the ad hoc processes would be poorer reflections of our existing governmental ones. Perhaps the ideal would be to introduce the existing ideas to children, and over a long period allow them to experiment with them while also liberating them to try new ideas.

Michael: Again, it seems to me that you would probably also have to involve parents, at least for those children who are living with their parents. How could you expect the children to get comfortable with such a democratic process if the parents or other primary caregivers aren’t involved? Of course, there is a whole generation of parents who have explored more democratic ways of being with their children, trying to maintain a middle path between guidance and freedom, structure and license.

Roger: Yes, there is a sizable literature on different parental ideologies in child rearing. I wish there were also research on children’s organizations and their facilitators.

Michael: Our time is just about over. Any last thoughts?

Roger: One thing that’s been most interesting to me about our discussion today is how often we have been concluding with, “Hmm, that would be an interesting experiment” or, “We should try that...” Those moments when we pause are euphoric...and I’m thinking that organizations need a little support to enable them to reflect more on what they are doing. I mentioned earlier the National Program of Working Children in Ecuador. They can get funded for their actions with children, but they cannot get funded for looking critically at their process.

Michael: The California Wellness Foundation’s new initiative, which is based on our research, has about 10% of its funds allocated for evaluation and participatory evaluation, with facilitators and kids playing an active part in documenting and assessing their own projects.

Roger: It’s very difficult to get that kind of funding and I think that we need it if we’re going to develop this movement. Facilitators in children’s organizations use different kinds of approaches; they should at least be given a chance to talk to each other about the processes they use. For example, I would jump at the chance to hear Latin American street workers come together to share their experiments in democratic process.

Michael: And the children?

Roger: With the children!

NOTES

1. See "Sharing Power: Participatory Public Health Research with California Teens," by Michael Schwab, in this volume.
2. See "Working Children in Ecuador Mobilize for Change," by María F. Espinosa, in this volume.
3. *Streetwise* (formerly the *Bulletin of Environmental Education*). Lewis Cohen, Urban Studies Center, University of Brighton, Sussex, England.
4. Association National de Conseils d'Enfants et de Jeunesse (15 Rue Martel, 75010 Paris, France).

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