CONSTRUCTING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Interacting participation spaces in the participation and organisation of children and young people as active citizens in Nicaragua

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Abstract

The spaces in which citizens are able to participate are of fundamental importance in development and democratisation. In "new governance spaces" around the world, citizens are invited to take part in policy deliberations. Andrea Cornwall has called these "invited spaces", to distinguish them from "popular spaces" owned and controlled by the citizens themselves.

A problem with "invited spaces" is that often deep-rooted feelings of dependency and disadvantage undermine the possibility of genuine deliberative decision-making. The alternative is for the poor and marginalised to create their own "popular spaces". However, if the important decisions are being made in the spaces where power is held, how does this help them?

One way is through "outsider" tactics of popular protest and direct action. However "popular spaces" also serve to prepare, empower, support and legitimise those who are then delegated to enter the "invited space" on their behalf.

Evidence of the effectiveness of this approach is found in the experience of CESESMA and other Nicaraguan NGOs working with child workers. In a recent study, NGO leaders agreed that in their experience there is little point in sending children ill-prepared to deliberate in adult spaces, and that their preferred way of working is to support children and young people's own spaces, from which the young people can launch their campaigns to influence decisions in adult spaces, using both insider and outsider tactics, as and when they feel fully prepared. They saw developing these dynamic linkages between participation spaces as an important part of their work.

Building active citizenship that is not subject to political manipulation is a fundamental role for Civil Society Organisations in Central America. Understanding the dynamics of interrelated participation spaces can help local civil society organisations and international development agencies work together to achieve this aim. In planning development interventions, we should look beyond identifying specific participation spaces to support, and focus instead on supporting dynamic processes that make optimum use of the linkages between different types of spaces, and that apply effective pressure for the transformation of tokenistic or manipulated spaces into more genuinely empowering ones.

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Introduction

The idea that the spaces in which citizens are able to participate are of fundamental importance to the outcomes of processes of development and democratisation is already much discussed in the literature on citizen participation and development.

This paper will first consider some significant recent thinking in this area, and then draw on the author's current work with Nicaraguan NGO CESESMA as an example of the use of different participation spaces in the empowerment of young coffee plantation workers – hitherto the weakest link in the chain of the globalised coffee market. Finally, based on this experience, it will present an alternative typology of participation spaces, that is also widely applicable to adult citizen participation, and suggest that this kind of dynamic space analysis can enhance NGO/civil society work in constructing and supporting active citizenship.

Spaces for transformation: "Invited" vs "popular" spaces

Those who hold most power not only set the agenda around which citizen participation can take place, but also generally own and control the spaces in which deliberation takes place and decisions are made. In an abundance of "new governance spaces" around the world (Taylor 2007), citizens are invited to enter these spaces and take part in their deliberations. Thus such spaces have come to be known as "invited spaces", in contrast to "popular spaces" owned and controlled by the citizens themselves. These ideas have been developed by Andrea Cornwall who expresses the tension like this:

> "The primary emphasis ... seems to be on relocating the poor within the prevailing order: bringing them in, finding them a place, lending them opportunities, inviting them to participate. The contrast here (is) between spaces that are chosen, fashioned and claimed by those at the margins ... and spaces into which those who are considered marginal are invited". (Cornwall 2004b p78)

This analysis fits well with current perceptions of children and young people's participation, since, in terms of governance and policy-making, they are clearly on the margins, and are resource-poor compared to most adults.

This analysis is developed further in John Gaventa's "Power Cube" (Gaventa 2006), which, as shown in Figure 1, adds additional dimensions of forms of power (visible, hidden and invisible) and levels of action (local, national, global). In Gaventa's model, Cornwall's "popular spaces" are called "claimed or created spaces". To complete the spacial dimension, he adds a third category of "closed spaces"; i.e. spaces completely closed to citizen participation. For Gaventa, whatever the terminology, the critical point is who creates the space, because, "those who create it are more likely to have power within it, and those who have power in one, may not have so much in another". (Gaventa 2006 p 27). The key issue in these invited spaces, as Cornwall and Coelho identify, is whether participation is meaningful, and leads to change:

"What does it take for marginalised and otherwise excluded actors to participate meaningfully in institutionalised participatory fora and for their participation to result in actual shifts in policy and practice?" (Cornwall and Coelho 2006 p8)
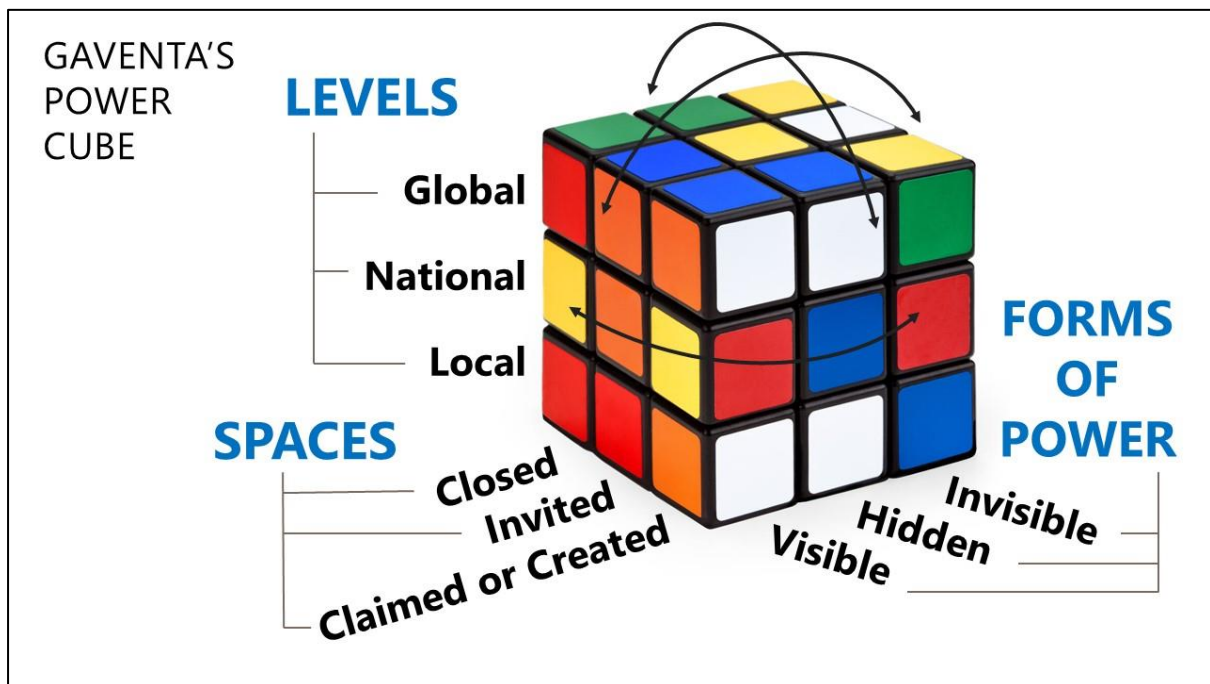

Figure 1: Gaventa's Power Cube (based on Gaventa, 2006)

A fundamental problem with promoting participation in "invited spaces" is that often, "entrenched relations of dependency, fear and disprivilege undermine the possibility of the kind of deliberative decision-making they are to foster" (Cornwall 2004a p2). The alternative is for the poor and the marginalised to create their own "popular spaces" in which to participate. However, if the important decisions are being made in the spaces where power is held, how does the ownership of their own "popular spaces" help the poor and marginalised to influence these decisions?

One way is through the whole spectrum of "outsider" tactics: popular protest, direct action, campaigns, lobbies, strikes and demonstrations. If these processes can achieve "critical mass", they can certainly influence decisions in otherwise closed institutional decision-making spaces. However, when it is children and young people who take to the streets seeking to influence decisions, the response of adults in authority is usually (a) to insist that they are being manipulated by "politically-motivated outsiders" and (b) to clamp down hard. An example from the UK is the many hundreds of children and young people who took to the streets in protest against the Iraq war in 2002-03, where both these adult responses were in evidence. Teachers, who might have encouraged young people to participate actively in school councils (invited spaces), were quick to sanction them for missing school without permission (Such, Walker and Walker 2005).

In Nicaragua, as throughout most of Latin America, the self-organisation of children and young people can be seen in the well-documented development of the NATRAS (child and adolescent workers) movement. Responses of adult authorities to NATRAS' campaigns have varied in different countries at different times, but have typically been characterised by the same responses: denying the legitimacy of children's voices and demands, and severe repression (Cussianovich 1995, Liebel 2007).

The experience of the NATRAS, in line with other social movement literature, suggests that in certain circumstances popular movements relying on "outsider tactics" can successfully influence decisions in the corridors of power. In other cases, where they fail to achieve the critical mass needed to change the political will of the power-holders, their demands fall on deaf ears, or worse, are met with reprisals and repression.

However, while "popular spaces" can be a base from which to launch a direct confrontation of authority from an "outsider" position, they also function effectively in other ways, notably when they serve to prepare, empower, support and legitimise those who are then delegated to enter the "lion's den" on their behalf and engage in policy deliberation in an "invited space". But how is this to be achieved?

As Cornwall and Coelho suggest, it is by no means straightforward:

> "For people to be able to exercise their political agency, they need first to recognise themselves as citizens rather than see themselves as beneficiaries or clients. Acquiring the means to participate equally demands processes of popular education and mobilisation that can enhance the skills and confidence of marginalised and excluded groups, enabling them to enter and engage in participatory arenas. … Participatory sphere institutions are also spaces for creating citizenship, where through learning to participate citizens cut their political teeth and acquire skills that can be transferred to other spheres – whether those of formal politics or neighbourhood action". (Cornwall and Coelho 2006 p8)

CESESMA in Nicaragua: Empowering young coffee plantation workers

This process of construction of active citizenship through action in interrelated participation spaces is in evidence in the work of Nicaraguan NGO CESESMA, based in San Ramón in the heart of Nicaragua's remote northern coffee-growing region.

Some of the world's finest coffee is grown in this area, where extreme poverty and dependence on coffee production lead to a high incidence of child labour and associated social problems. The Nicaraguan coffee industry employs many thousands of child workers who work long hours in difficult and dangerous conditions, receiving little or no payment for their efforts. Almost all drop out of school early, while some have no opportunity to go to school at all. Most of these children are aware that they have rights on paper, but are not aware of any mechanisms available to them to demand or defend their rights. Their parents' expectation that they will work from a young age to help support the family leaves them few alternatives. The globalised coffee market has little respect for the rights of child coffee workers, condemning them to poverty, dependency and little hope of change.

CESESMA's mission is to "To promote and defend the rights of children and young people, through processes of awareness-raising, reflection and action in partnership with rural children and young people, and other members of the community". CESESMA pursues this mission through various intervention strategies. One particular strategy which is central to this work is the training and support of young community education activists ("promotores" and "promotoras" in Spanish). Promotores/as, typically aged 12-18, are young people trained to run out-of-school learning groups with younger children in their communities. This gives them a leadership role and a platform for active organisation and engagement in community development activities and direct action in defense of children's rights, through which they influence political processes at different levels.

The five-stage process of training and development of a promotor/a, which is described in detail in Shier (2009), can be summarised as follows:

Stage1: Children from age 6 upwards join out-of-school activity groups in their village communities which are run by already-trained and experienced young promotores/as. These include arts and crafts groups, girls and young women's groups, organic farming and environmental action groups, folk-dance (Figure 2), children's radio and children's theatre groups.

Figure 2: Promotora Jeymi González (19) working with a children's dance group in El Diamante, La Dalia

Stage 2: Children (typically aged 12+) voluntarily join a promotores/as' training course run by CESESMA, and train to become promotores and promotoras.

Stage 3: New promotores/as, aged 13+, organised in a community promotores' network, multiply their skills and knowledge with other children and young people in their communities. CESESMA offers them continuing training and development opportunities, support and follow-up.

Stage 4: Promotores/as become active in advocacy and defense of children's rights, and in community action for development. Examples of these are:

- Participation in school councils, community children and youth committees, and as student representatives on school management committees.
- Participation as youth representatives in adult-dominated groups such as Municipal Children and Youth Committees and Municipal Development Committees.
- Environmental campaigns; for example, reporting illegal logging to the authorities, anti-burning and reforestation campaigns.
- Awareness-raising on child-labour issues on the coffee plantations. The aim here is not to abolish child labour, which is considered unrealistic, but to defend the rights of working children; for example reducing children's involvement in harmful work like spraying pesticides.
- Participation in national campaigns, including the campaign against physical and humiliating punishment, campaign against sexual abuse, campaign for native seeds and biodiversity and against genetically modified crops, campaign for greater state investment in children and youth, campaign for free quality education.
- Youth theatre groups devise, produce and present original plays which expose issues of violence, abuse and exploitation to get communities talking about them as a first step to organised local action.
- A children's radio team which, through a network of young reporters, raises awareness of children's rights abuses, encouraging and publicising action in defense of children's rights.

Stage 5: The most capable and committed promotores/as, typically aged 15+, join CESESMA's area teams. These are the main co-ordinating bodies, responsible for planning, organising, monitoring, follow-up and evaluation of all the young Promotores/as' work in the district (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Monthly meeting of the Yasica Sur Area Team in the Community House at La Corona. Team members are aged from 11 to 21.

This experience provides several examples of the dynamic interrelationship of different participation spaces as discussed above. One of these is the network of young environmentalists. Children and young people form environmental action groups in their villages ("popular" or "created" spaces). A network of such groups sends representatives to the Municipal Environmental Committee, which is an adult-run "invited" space, where environmental policies and plans for the district are deliberated on. What is crucial is that the young people sit at the adult table as representatives of an organised local group, with its own track record of action in the community, with both practical and theoretical knowledge of the issues under discussion, and with any timidity about speaking out in public long cast aside. Thus the established link between the young people's own "popular space" and the adult "invited space" does away with the tokenism that is often felt to contaminate young people's participation in such arenas.

Another example is a group of young coffee plantation workers aged 10-16 who delivered the keynote presentation at a national forum, "Violence against Children and Young People: A global problem, a Nicaraguan response", in the capital city Managua in August 2007. Using a technique called "Children's Consultancy" (Shier 1999, 2001), the children designed and carried out their own investigation of the problem of violence as they knew and lived it on the coffee plantation. The space where this work took place was the children's own space, located on the coffee plantation where they lived and worked, but with a process facilitated by adults from CESESMA; adults known to and trusted by the children and their parents (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Young Consultants team (age 10-16) drawing up the conclusions from their study in the schoolroom on the coffee plantation.

The children made their final presentation in a large, formal, adult-dominated "invited space", but because of the preparation they had done in their own space in the months before, and the way this had been facilitated, they felt empowered and confident to speak out, even to the point of presenting a direct challenge to the government Minister for the Family (Figure 5). Any suggestion of tokenism was ruled out, as it was plain to all present that the children took the stage as invited experts on a topic they knew personally and had investigated thoroughly, namely the violence experienced by children and young people like themselves, living and working on the coffee plantations.

Figure 5: Arlen, aged 10, presents the Young Consultants' challenge for change to the Nicaraguan Minister for Children and Families at the national conference in Managua. The Minister then addressed the conference to give a direct response to the Young Consultants' recommendations.
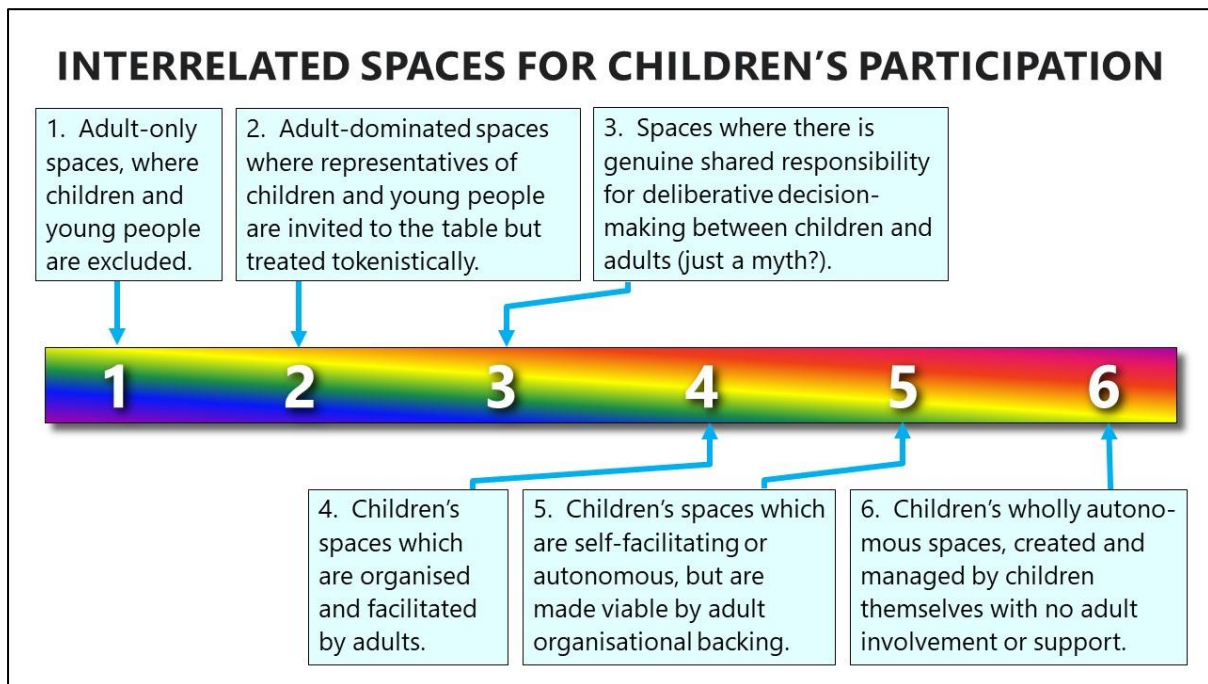
A spectrum of participation spaces

Figure 6: Interrelated spaces for children's participation

Taking Cornwall and Gaventa's ideas as points of reference, we can draw on CESESMA's experience to refine our understanding of the concept of "participation spaces" in relation to children and young people. Rather than a simple distinction between "invited" and "popular" spaces, we can identify a range or spectrum of participation spaces as follows:

1. Adult only spaces, where children and young people are excluded.

2. Adult-dominated spaces where representatives of children and young people are invited to the table but treated tokenistically.

3. Spaces where there is genuine shared responsibility for deliberative decision-making between children and adults (are these real or just a fantasy?).

4. Children's spaces which are organised and facilitated by adults.

5. Children's spaces which are self-facilitating or autonomous, but are made viable by adult organisational backing.

6. Children's wholly autonomous spaces, created and managed by children themselves with no adult involvement or support (or even awareness in many cases).

This should be thought of as a spectrum, rather than a hierarchy. Whilst the degree of power and control that children and young people have in the different spaces increases from Type 1 to Type 6, this does not imply that Type 6 will be more effective in enabling children to influence public policy. For this, the children generally need to find a way to make their voice heard in Type 1 or 2 spaces, where the real decisions are made.

The critical point here is that the power and effectiveness of these spaces lies not in the spaces as such, but in the connections and movements between them and in the struggle to transform them.

Examples of the connections and movements between spaces occur when children are delegated from a Type 5 space to go and present their demands to a Type 2 or 3 space, like the young environmental activists described above taking their proposals to the Municipal Environmental Committee, or the young coffee-plantation workers using a Type 4 space to prepare themselves to present their views credibly and confidently in a Type 2 space, thus directly challenging the prevailing tokenism. Another example from CESESMA's recent experience is when children and young people meeting in Type 2 and 3 spaces organised an environmental action march which ended up in front of the Type 1 Town Hall.

The struggle to transform spaces might involve, for example, challenging a Type 1 space to become a Type 2 and then a Type 3 space, or empowering children in a Type 4 space to turn it into a Type 5 or Type 6 space, as has happened with many of the local activity groups initially supported by CESESMA and now running autonomously.

Experienced children and young people's participation practitioners from a variety of Nicaraguan NGOs interviewed in a recent study (Shier 2010) considered that helping to push these kinds of transformations of participation spaces was an important part of their work. Experience had shown, they said, that there is little point in sending children ill-prepared to deliberate in adult spaces, and that their preferred way of working is to support children and young people's own spaces, from which the young people can launch their campaigns to influence decisions in adult spaces, using both insider and outsider tactics, as and when they feel fully prepared.

> "There's been discussion about whether children and young people should be in the local authority committees or in their own spaces. There are experiences of both. Generally the children and young people are in their own spaces. Having the kids in the local authority committees is to condemn them to keep quiet, because they discuss a lot of topics that don't interest them, that they don't have expertise on, that they haven't really got to grips with. It doesn't relate to their own experience. It has worked out better to give them their own spaces". (Nicaraguan NGO leader)

> "It starts from the children and young people's own groups. First amongst themselves to gain skills and develop their competence; first working with their peers, then the family, the local community, and then the local authorities". (Nicaraguan NGO leader)

Although this typology was developed to help us understand interacting spaces for children and young people's participation, it is easily adapted to describe spaces for the exercise of active citizenship in general, where the emphasis is on empowering those groups that have hitherto been excluded or marginalised. By substituting "established power-holders" and "hitherto excluded or marginalised groups" for adults and children respectively we can propose the following alternative typology:

1. Closed spaces exclusive to established power-holders, where all others are excluded.

2. Spaces dominated by established power-holders, where representatives of hitherto excluded or marginalised groups are invited to participate but treated tokenistically.

3. Spaces where there is genuine shared responsibility for decision-making between established power-holders and hitherto excluded or marginalised groups.

4. Separate spaces for the participation of hitherto excluded or marginalised groups that are established, organised and facilitated by the established power-holders.

5. Separate spaces created for participation of hitherto excluded or marginalised groups which are self-facilitating or autonomous, but are made viable by the backing of the established power-holders.

6. Wholly autonomous spaces created and managed by excluded or marginalised groups without the backing or support of the established power-holders (may be oppositional or illegal).

As with the model for children and young people's spaces, the important thing about this model is not the different types of spaces in themselves, but the way it helps us to highlight the dynamics of the interactions and interrelations between them, and processes of transformation from one to another.

Conclusion

Building active citizenship that is not subject to political manipulation is a fundamental role for Civil Society Organisations in Nicaragua and other Central American countries responding to the challenges of democratisation, development and globalisation. In Nicaragua in particular, where the political culture is characterised by extreme polarisation, demagogic populism, corruption and clientilism, building an active and reflective citizenship that is not so easily manipulated by "caudillos" (corrupt political bosses) is vital to the democratisation process.

Strengthening our analysis of the dynamics of interrelated participation spaces can help both local civil society organisations and international development agencies work together to achieve this aim. In planning development interventions, we should look beyond identifying specific participation spaces to support and promote, focusing instead on supporting dynamic processes that make optimum use of the linkages between different types of spaces, and that apply effective pressure for the transforming of tokenistic or manipulated spaces into more genuinely empowering ones.

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