How Children and Young People Influence Policy-Makers: Lessons from Nicaragua

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This article describes a participatory research project, which explored four case studies of children and young people's successful political advocacy in Nicaragua. The analysis combined a human rights-based approach and a human development approach, and included concepts of multiple settings and levels, interrelated participation spaces, children and young people's citizenship, inclusion and exclusion, democracy, advocacy and empowerment. The main problems faced by children and young people seeking to influence policy-makers were identified as adultism, dependency and lack of accountability. The research identified pre-conditions, participation spaces and ways of organising for effective advocacy, and facilitation methods that had proved effective. It concludes that children and young people who achieve effective advocacy are generally self-empowered, but can count on effective adult support and facilitation. They work through coordination with the authorities and not by clashing with them, but need to ensure effective follow up if they want politicians to keep their promises. © 2012 The Author(s). Children & Society © 2012 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited

Keywords: participation, policy and practice, international childhoods, rights.

Introduction

Since Nicaragua ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, there has been significant progress on the realisation of children and young people's right to participate, largely facilitated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other elements of organised civil society (CODENI, 2003). During these years, a number of positive experiences of children and young people's organised participation have been documented and published (see, e.g. Save the Children Canada, 2004; Shier, 2009).

While these and many other case studies tell us that there is a lot of participatory activity going on, with innovative approaches and capable facilitation, there is less evidence that children and young people's actions are having real influence on the policy-makers whose decisions affect their life-chances and well-being.

In the wider literature on participation, researchers have expressed concerns over the scarce evidence of discernible impact of children and young people's advocacy on major policy decisions (Cockburn, 2010; Tisdall and Davis, 2004; Williams, 2004). When such an impact is reported, we often know little about how this was achieved and how it might be reproduced (Halsey and others 2006).

A number of projects in Nicaragua do provide examples of effective children and young people's advocacy. However, these are rarely documented or, if they are, the results are not disseminated. This lack of empirical evidence motivated independent Nicaraguan NGO CESESMA (The Centre for Education in Health and Environment, which works with children and young people in the northern coffee-growing region) and the University of the North of Nicaragua to join forces to seek answers to the following questions.

- What are the main problems faced by children and young people seeking to influence public policy?[1]
- What prior conditions increase children and young people's chances of influencing policy?
- What spaces or forms of organisation help children and young people achieve policy influence?
- What methods and approaches by adult helpers/facilitators increase children and young people's influence on policy-makers?

This article begins with a brief outline of the conceptual framework on which the research was premised.[2] It goes on to summarise the research methodology and then presents an overview of the research findings.

Conceptual framework

Although there is now a wide and varied literature on the subject, there is no unified or universal theory of children and young people's participation (Thomas, 2007), but rather studies from many different approaches and disciplines. To provide conceptual coherence for the investigation, the research team therefore began the project by reviewing concepts and theories related to the research topic, and developed the following conceptual framework, based on the integration of two complementary approaches: a human rights-based approach and a human development approach.

A human rights-based approach

A human rights-based approach requires an understanding of human rights but, more to the point, an intervention approach based on these rights. In this respect, many organisations working with children and young people in Nicaragua, as elsewhere in Latin America, use the model advocated by Save the Children, conceptualising a 'human rights-based' approach to programming by contrasting it with more traditional approaches (Save the Children, 2005). In Spanish, the term 'asistencialismo' (roughly 'an approach based on giving or receiving aid or assistance') describes the traditional approach and allows us to summarise the contrast as follows: Instead of giving people things that they are identified as lacking, organisations adopting a human rights-based approach work directly with the people concerned as citizens and social actors, helping them to identify the violations of their human rights that are preventing them from gaining access to these necessities. People can then use this knowledge to formulate demands and generate collective action for the restitution and protection of these rights.

A human development approach based on evolving capacities

To incorporate the human development approach, the team considered the paradigm change that has occurred in childhood studies over the past quarter-century. The traditional paradigm sees children and young people as having limited capability due to their limited

social and intellectual development. They therefore need to be taught, protected and disciplined until, with the passage of time and a good education, they acquire the capacity to think and act for themselves. This paradigm, while strongly contested in the academic field, still characterises socially embedded popular constructs of childhood in most of the world.

The new paradigm (gaining influence since the 1980s) recognises that from their earliest years, children have significant capabilities, which enable them to act as the main protagonists in their own development. The development of their capacities is enabled and driven by their experience of action and the effects of their action in the world (James and Prout, 1997). In other words, children are the driving force of their own development, and develop through their participation in the world around them. Implicit in this paradigm is the message that there is no age limit for participation, rather a capacity for participation, which evolves from birth onwards. The concept of the evolving capacities of the child (Lansdown, 2005) is therefore key to the linkage between a human rights-based approach and a human development approach to participation.

The human development approach recognises the uniqueness of every individual. Critics of human rights-based approaches have argued that the concept of universal human rights does not work in a world where difference and diversity prevail (Ayton-Shenker, 1995), and some have even suggested that a human rights-based approach is an imposition of 'Western' hegemony (e.g. Mutua, 2002). The Nicaraguan team takes the opposite view, using the concept of yin-yang to signify the coherence of two complementary ideas: Human rights — universal and the same for all; and human beings — unique and diverse. The complementarity of the two approaches brings wholeness and integrity to the work (Figure 1).

From this starting point, the team went on to identify eight key concepts to help shape the analysis of the case studies (Figure 1).
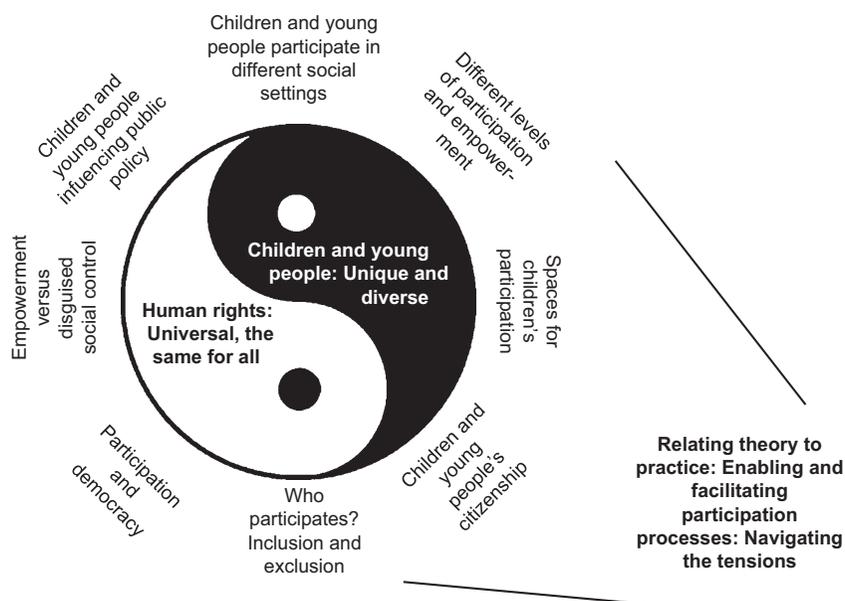

Figure 1. Visualisation of the conceptual framework for the study.

Children and young people participate in different settings: The public decision-making sphere is just one of the many settings where children and young people exercise their right to participate. Processes in other settings, starting from the home and including the school and local non-school activity groups, all contribute to their development as active citizens.

Levels of participation and empowerment: Empowerment was defined as a combination of enabling conditions, capability and attitude; that is, to be considered 'empowered', a child or young person must be in conditions that make it possible for them to effect change, must have the knowledge and capability necessary to do so and above all, *must feel themselves to be able to effect change.*

The team looked at Hart's (1992) Ladder, particularly the false participation levels of manipulation, decoration and tokenism, and Shier's (2001) 'Pathways to Participation' model, with its emphasis on the role of the adult facilitator. Levels of empowerment were also considered through the lens of 'Protagonismo Infantil' or children's protagonism, a concept associated with the child and adolescent workers' (NATRAS) movements of Latin America (Leibel and others, 2001).

Spaces for children and young people's participation and the interrelation between them: Building on Andrea Cornwall's (2004) ideas about invited spaces and popular spaces, Shier (2008) developed a spectrum of participation spaces, with spaces organised autonomously by children and young people without adult help at one end (often without the knowledge of adults or even in opposition to them), and spaces with blanket exclusion of children and young people at the other. The model emphasises the dynamic interrelation between the different spaces, for example, children and young people gathering in their own space to prepare a set of demands, which they later take to an adult-dominated decision-making committee.

Children and young people's citizenship: This is a contested area in Nicaragua as the Constitution states that those aged 16 and over are Nicaraguan citizens with the right to vote, implying that those under 16 are not. Responding to this anomaly, the team proposed a concept of 'active citizenship', which recognises the person who assumes the role and responsibilities of an active citizen. In this sense, children and young people, through their active participation in the community, establish their identity as citizens, deserving and, if necessary, demanding that their citizenship be recognised and respected (IAWGCP, 2008).

Who participates? Inclusion and exclusion: Although all children and young people have the same right to participate without any form of discrimination (UNCRC Article 2), many forms of exclusion and discrimination limit or prevent opportunities to participate. While recognising that all forms of discrimination are equally prohibited by the UNCRC, including gender, disability and intolerance of diversity, the research team identified the dominance of adolescents (and sometimes young adults) in participation processes as a particular problem in this context, as it often leads to marginalisation of younger children.

Participation and democracy: Considering the application of concepts of democracy in children and young people's participation, the distinction between participative (direct or deliberative) democracy and representative (or electoral) democracy was considered fundamental (Cairns, 2006). The advantages and disadvantages of each type were considered, leading to the conclusion that both are appropriate in different circumstances.

Empowerment versus disguised social control: In the promotion and facilitation of children and young people's participation, there are always tensions between participation as empowerment and participation as social control — although often well-disguised (Shier, 2010). Applying this analysis in practice requires us continually to ask questions about who controls the space, who sets the agenda, who decides who to invite, who controls the resources and above all, who decides what children and young people are allowed to do and what is prohibited.

Children and young people influencing public policy: 'Influence' occurs in many ways, for example:

- Being a direct participant in a policy-making body.
- Acting in an advisory or consultancy role to policy-makers.
- Meeting face-to-face with policy-makers, being listed to and taken seriously.
- Mobilising a large body of opinion to put pressure on policy-makers: marches, petitions, etc.
- Using the media effectively to give added force to your views.

Analytical reflection on each of these eight areas can contribute to more effective and responsive practice.

Research methodology and the four case studies

Through an initial survey e-mailed to over fifty organisations working with children and young people throughout Nicaragua, the research team identified ten cases where it was claimed that children and young people's efforts had influenced policy decisions that affected them and their communities. From these, four contrasting case studies from different parts of the country were selected for further investigation. The main criterion for selection was evidence of influence on policy. Secondary criteria were geographical spread and contrast, and logistical issues.

- Children and young people from La Dalia in the heart of the northern coffee-growing zone told us about their role in helping to draw up a new Municipal Education Development Plan in 2007–08. The former Mayor of La Dalia confirmed that the young people's involvement was influential in shaping the local plan, and the Ministry of Education corroborated this.
- Children and young people from Ciudad Sandino, an urban area on the outskirts of the capital, told us about their campaign for increased investment in children and youth in their district. A senior council official confirmed that the children and young people's proposals were substantially reflected in subsequent municipal budgets.
- Children and young people from the old colonial city of Granada told us about their role in helping to create a municipal agenda for children and youth and get it adopted by the city council. A senior council official confirmed that the council had adopted the agenda incorporating the children and young people's ideas.
- Children and young people from remote San Carlos near the southern border told us about participating in the district's first Municipal Children's Forum, and getting a policy commitment from mayoral candidates in the 2008 local elections. A senior council official confirmed that the council had implemented many of the proposals in this agreement.

These four case studies were further investigated through:

- Focus groups of children and young people who had participated in the experience. Approximately equal numbers of boys and girls participated in all four groups. Almost all were school attenders and able to read and write, although many, especially in the rural areas, combined their education with agricultural and/or domestic work.
- Focus groups of adult workers who had helped facilitate the processes.
- Interviews with key decision-makers in the four local authorities who confirmed that policy decisions were influenced by the young people's proposals as described above.
- Two-day seminar bringing together children, young people and adults from all four areas to consider the initial findings and jointly formulate conclusions and recommendations.

The research followed the prevailing Nicaraguan approach to child research ethics, in that rules and standards were applied according to well-established practices, but without the existence of a formal (written) code of ethics. More than 'informed consent', the young participants gave enthusiastic and active commitment throughout the process.

The full report in Spanish contains over a hundred direct quotes from research participants, mainly children and young people. The following sections include a small sample of these in translation to give a flavour of the original material, selected as broadly representative of the opinions expressed.

Main findings: The four key questions

Problems and obstacles to be overcome

In all four case studies, the children and young people and the adult facilitators alike spoke of difficulties they had faced in their efforts to influence policy-makers.

Adultism

The research team defines adultism as a belief system based on the idea that the adult human being is in some sense superior to the child or of greater worth, and thus the child, by default, inferior or of lesser worth. The term also describes social structures, practices and behaviours based on these beliefs. These beliefs find support in a persistent view of the child as an object, and not a human rights holder. This construction of the child as an object can be found in both its traditional form, which views the child as property of his or her parents and a source of cheap labour, and in a more modern manifestation where the child is treated as an object of social interventions 'in its best interests' without being given the chance to express an opinion or to have his or her specific needs recognised and taken into account.

Participants in the research talked about various manifestations of adultism:

They want just adults to participate and sometimes they don't listen to us. (Adolescent, Granada)

At the beginning of the process, they wouldn't make space for the children. (Adolescent, La Dalia)

Sometimes there were problems getting the teachers to accept the opinions we were expressing. (Child, San Carlos)

Dependency/'Asistencalismo'

The Spanish term 'Asistencialismo', an approach based on giving or receiving aid or assistance, has been mentioned above as the antithesis of a human rights-based approach. Adult participants in the research identified the prevalence of these attitudes as one of the problems faced in promoting children and young people's participation.

Lack of accountability and lack of follow-up

> They signed an agreement, but we didn't get a copy of the signed agreement so as to be able to follow up on what promises were kept and what weren't. (Child, San Carlos)

In many cases, successful advocacy was described in terms of agreements signed or policies adopted by local councils or other authorities. However, the authorities showed little sense of accountability to children and young people for the implementation of these agreements, and had little or no concept of themselves as duty-bearers in relation to children and young people's rights. In the face of this difficulty, there was rarely evidence of an adequate follow-up strategy to ensure monitoring of the authority's commitments, and where necessary, demand that agreements were kept.

Conditions that favour children and young people's influence on policy-makers

The research identified a number of prior conditions, which increase children and young people's chances of influencing public policy. They fall into three categories which are considered below:

Conditions related to the children and young people themselves

In each case, the starting point was the interest of the children and young people in the proposals being advocated, and in organising to achieve change.

> Our interest was to create an education plan that was more equitable and suited to our context. (Adolescent, La Dalia)

The second element in this category is the knowledge and capability of the children and young people.

> When they made their presentation at the forum, you could see that these were kids who were very capable of presenting their proposals. (Adult facilitator, San Carlos)

Another key concept was 'leadership'.

> The most influential factors were our leadership, our self-esteem and our attitudes. (Adolescent, *Granada*)

'Leadership' here refers to the way that certain individuals within a group emerge as having the capacity to organise and mobilise the rest of the group, although these individuals need not be formally recognised as the 'leader' of the group. This is a contested area, as some adult practitioners suggest that encouraging children and young people's leadership can be counter-productive (e.g. Feinstein and O'Kane, 2005, p. 20). However, the young participants in this research, while quick to challenge traditional leadership styles, tended to welcome the emergence of autonomous leadership within their own groups and see it as a positive factor

in enabling their success, as well as reducing their dependence on adults. They felt that young leaders with good organisational and communication skills had an important role to play in taking forward children's ideas and proposals to influence policy-makers.

The final element in this category is 'organisation', here understood as working together or teamwork. When children and young people organise, that is, decide to work together, they immediately increase their capacity to achieve influence in whatever setting.

Conditions related to the NGO (or other organisation) that is supporting or facilitating the children and young people's efforts

In all four of the experiences investigated, an NGO played an important role in the preparation, facilitation and accompaniment of the advocacy processes. In this research project, no evidence was found of children and young people achieving significant impact without the support of an adult-run organisation, although such cases have been reported elsewhere (IA-WGCP, 2008; Chapter 10; Leibel and others, 2001).

The fact that the NGOs in question applied a human rights-based approach to their work was significant in supporting the children and young people throughout the process. For example, a human rights approach was applied to the initial analysis of the problems they aimed to influence, and again as the basis for the formulation of claims and proposals. Above all, a human rights approach was used in supporting the children and young people in putting these claims and proposals forward effectively to adult decision-makers. Without this underpinning human rights focus, the young people's advocacy could easily have lapsed into aid-seeking or 'asistencialismo'.

Linked to this is the idea that an integrated or holistic approach is more likely to create the conditions for successful policy impact. This may involve seeking to integrate the different settings or spheres of children and young people's lives: family, school, local community and municipality; and working with the important interrelationships between these as a way of promoting the overall empowerment of children and young people (discussed further below).

Integration may also mean seeking to involve all the relevant social actors (or stakeholders) in the process; centring on the children and young people but also incorporating at appropriate stages and in appropriate ways parents and other family members, school teachers, community leaders, NGO representatives, local and national government officials and, in the case of working children and young people, employers. An integrated approach recognises that we are all part of this 'social fabric'.

Conditions related to other actors (stakeholders and duty-bearers)

In this category, the children and young people considered the support of their fathers and mothers the most important factor. Some also mentioned the support of the wider extended family.

Some of the experiences investigated used schools (primary and secondary) as the initial space for children and young people to organise and participate, and to kick-start the advocacy process. While not all children in Nicaragua go to school, the large majority can usually be found there (provided it's not harvest time), so activities such as surveys and consultations carried out in schools are an important part of many participation and advo-

cacy processes. The support of teachers and school authorities is therefore an essential pre-condition and, if the proposal aims to have an impact at district level, a green light from the local Education Ministry office will also help. Support from local community leaders and other people of influence in the community is another positive factor.

Finally in this category, the support of the local Alcaldía (mayor's office or district council) is an important factor. Although confrontation and violence are significant features of political process in Nicaragua, this study found no evidence of children and young people achieving successful policy impact through conflict or power struggles with adult authorities. Our findings in fact suggest the opposite; the starting point is a local authority that already recognises the value of taking children and young people's views into account in decision-making.

In all four case studies, the adult participants emphasised coordination or alliances between the local authority and civil society as one of the most important factors that facilitated the success of children and young people's advocacy.

> At that time, there was a degree of unity between the local authority, the government agencies and the NGOs. This favoured the work. (Adult facilitator, Granada)

Spaces and ways of organising to influence public policy

Children and young people's own spaces

In all four case studies, participants said that it was important for the children and young people to have their own participation spaces. This is not to imply that there was no adult support or facilitation; such support is indeed vital. 'Own spaces' rather refers to the fact that in these spaces children and young people make decisions, agree activity plans and resolve problems. In the case studies, the adults understood their role in these spaces as supportive rather than directive. In each case, the children and young people's own organising spaces served as springboards, helping the young people prepare themselves to approach adult decision-makers with confidence and knowledge of the issues.

Many of the children and young people mentioned that their participation began in what they called 'interest groups', which had little to do with influencing public policy. These included artistic, cultural, environmental and recreational groups, and vocational education courses. In these groups, they learn to work together, plan and organise, and develop communication skills, thus preparing to launch themselves to another level when the opportunity or the need arises (see Shier, 2008, 2009).

However, to achieve an impact at municipal level, the children and young people's organisation has to go beyond their own groups at local community or neighbourhood level. In this respect, some of the young people emphasised the importance of networking. In Ciudad Sandino, CECIM promotes and supports a Young Leaders' Network. In La Dalia, CESESMA promotes networks of young community education volunteers (Promotores and Promotoras) as a central strategy (Shier, 2009).

While everyone can participate directly in some advocacy actions, such as marches, public assemblies and lobbies, there are other kinds of advocacy processes where it is necessary to elect representatives of the larger group to put forward and negotiate proposals in decision-

making settings. In the case studies, children and young people spoke of electing their representatives as part of the advocacy process. The adults also mentioned these election processes, and emphasised the importance of organising them in such a way that all participants felt they were represented.

Spaces for training and development

The children and young people talked about training workshops as an initial stage of each process. To have an influence in adult-dominated decision-making spaces, the children and young people need to be well-informed about the topics that concern them. They need to know their rights, and recognise themselves as rights holders capable of demanding and defending these rights. Above all, they need effective communication skills to be able to put forward proposals and defend their positions. Usually, such training is facilitated by adult NGO staff, but there are also situations where trained young volunteers (Promotores/as) run training for other children and young people, so generating a 'multiplier effect'.

> We ran workshops and by means of these activities, we made the children and young people aware of how important it was to be able to influence decision-making in our community. (Adolescent promotor, Granada)

Lobbies, forums and assemblies

A third kind of participation space discussed in the case studies were *cabildos* (lobbies), assemblies and forums. The San Carlos experience deals specifically with the development of the Municipal Children's Forum.

> Then there was the municipal forum. There were people from the District Council, and the candidates who wanted to be elected as the next Mayor. We presented proposals in relation to our needs, and we asked the candidates to sign an agreement in favour of children and young people. (Adolescent, Can Carlos)

Although children's lobbies and children's forums are well-established as advocacy mechanisms, it is difficult to tell if the politicians who participate feel any sense of accountability to the children and young people, or if they are seeking to manipulate them to further their own interests. Monitoring and follow-up are vital to ensure that the politicians keep their promises.

Access to adult-dominated decision-making spaces

Given that almost all significant decisions that affect children and young people are made by adults in closed spaces from which children and young people are excluded, children and young people seeking to influence policy need to find a way to influence what goes on in these spaces — ideally from the inside. In all the experiences in this research, children and young people spoke about how they were seeking influence in adult decision-making spaces.

> Before, when they held the water committee meetings, only our parents were invited, not us, and our opinions weren't heard. (Adolescent, San Carlos)

> Young people are taking up positions in adult spaces, for example, in Community Associations and the Municipal Development Committee. There they're putting forward development proposals. (Adolescent, Granada)

Methods and approaches by adult helpers/facilitators that help increase children and young people's influence on policy-makers

There was agreement between children and young people and adult workers that the following support and facilitation methods and approaches had been found to be effective in enabling children and young people to influence policy:

- Working in the schools, because this is where the majority of the children can be found in any community.
- House-to-house visits, so as not to exclude those who aren't in school, and also to convince parents who are doubtful about letting their sons and daughters participate. Children and young people can make house-to-house visits if well-prepared, although adult accompaniment is often appropriate.
- Parallel awareness-raising process with adults (parents, teachers, local community-leaders, etc.), and encouraging them to support the children and young people's work.
- Working with existing out-of-school activity groups, using these to generate interest and recruit participants.
- Liaison and coordination between different groups and organisations active in the area.
- Providing relevant training for children and young people, using dynamic, fun, creative, participatory methods, and an approach that recognises, values and builds on their real-life experience.
- Creating or supporting children and young people's own organising spaces, where they can make their own decisions and where their self-organisation, pro-activism and leadership are recognised and encouraged.
- Participatory appraisal of the problems that affect children and young people in their daily lives. This can include various kinds of surveys and consultations, and can be carried out by children and young people themselves with appropriate training and support.
- Children and young people can then collectively draw up their demands, claims and proposals, based on group consensus, with adult support, but no manipulation.
- Fair election of representatives to take children and young people's claims and proposals to the adult authorities.
- Children and young people need access to the people and places where the real decisions are being made (mayor's office, district council, education ministry, etc.), and supportive adult facilitators can help them negotiate this.
- Accompaniment of children and young people attending meetings with adult decision-makers, including forums, lobbies and other advocacy activities.
- Involving children and young people not just in making initial decisions, but also in monitoring and follow-up to ensure that proposed changes take effect in practice.

The concept of empowerment and its implications in practice were considered fundamental to this analysis of methods and approaches. Empowerment was earlier defined as requiring enabling conditions, capability and, above all, belief that one is capable of effecting change. Considering how this works in practice, two key ideas emerged:

The first is that *nobody empowers anyone*. Specifically, adult trainers or facilitators do not 'empower' children and young people. Only children and young people can empower themselves. Even if adults decide to 'share' some of their power with young people, in itself this is not real empowerment, because power given in this way can just as easily be taken away

if the person concerned is not able to take control of this power in their own right. Although adults cannot empower children and young people, what they can do is promote and facilitate experiential learning processes through which children and young people can empower themselves (see Freire, 1972, for a similar analysis).

The second key idea is that to support children and young people's empowerment, we must encourage autonomy (which can be collective, not just individual), and seek to avoid whatever tends to breed or sustain dependence. Often, adult facilitators do everything they can with the best intentions to help children and young people achieve an impact. They may achieve impressive results in the short-term, for example, a positive response from the authorities. However, when the process is over, if the young people do not have the capacity to repeat this success independently, they remain dependent on the adult facilitators. In planning for participation, we must think about how to help children and young people develop and strengthen their autonomy, and so avoid the dependency trap.

> Empowering the children … the adults provide them with the tools, and then no-one can stop them. (Adult facilitator, Granada)

Conclusion: can children and young people really make an impact on public policy?

Through this research, answers have been found for the four questions posed at the beginning. We know about the main problems that children and young people face when they set out to influence policy-makers, and about the pre-conditions, spaces, ways of organising, and methods of adult support and intervention that can help them achieve results.

Knowing the children and young people who participated in this research and the adult teams that accompanied and facilitated them, and having worked closely with them to describe and analyse their experiences, we suggest the following conclusions:

- Children and young people who succeed in influencing policy-makers are likely to be well-prepared, trained and organised, and to believe in their own ability to advocate for change; in other words, empowered. And this empowerment is not something that someone has handed them on a plate. It is the result of a long process of active participation and commitment.
- It has also usually involved the support of equally-committed adults who are themselves prepared and trained for this role. They understand the importance of promoting autonomy rather than dependency, and are careful to avoid manipulation.
- The evidence from this study suggests that children and young people are more likely to be successful in influencing policy-makers through liaison and coordination with the authorities, and not by clashing with them.
- Politicians in Nicaragua generally have little sense of accountability towards children and young people or of themselves as duty-bearers in relation to human rights. To ensure that children and young people's advocacy has long-term impact therefore requires effective monitoring and follow-up. Children and young people can take this on themselves, but help from skilled adults can make a real difference in ensuring that agreements are complied with and promises are kept.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 In this study, the definitions used are taken from the Nicaraguan Children and Adolescents Legal Code: *Child* is from birth to 12 years, and *Adolescent* from 13 to 17 years. In this article, 'young person' is used as a synonym for 'adolescent' and therefore does not include young adults of 18 years and above. Distinguishing between children and adolescents in this way (and excluding young adults) makes for a more realistic and insightful analysis of the data than the often misleading UNCRC approach of labelling everyone from birth to 18 a child.

2 The final report of this research project in Spanish, *Incidencia de niños, niñas y adolescentes como ciudadanos/as activos/as en Nicaragua* (CESESMA-UNN, 2010), has been published in print and digital formats. This provides a fuller description and discussion of the conceptual framework summarised here. In the remainder of this article where no other citation is given, reference is being made to the contents of this report.

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