

# Children and Adolescents as Water Activists



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## Overview



1. Water in rural Nicaragua
2. CESESMA in Nicaragua
3. Pathways to Participation
4. A spectrum of water customers
5. Children as consultants and transformative researchers
6. A concluding reflection



### Water in rural Nicaragua



- Here people cannot take it for granted that unlimited clean water will be piped into their homes.



- Collective action on water issues is the norm. People organise collectively to negotiate and collaborate with the water company to bring piped (potable) water to their village.

- In remoter areas they drill and maintain community wells and clean and protect natural water sources.



- And sometimes they may organise to protest against the actions of the water company if they feel their rights are being ignored.





## CESESMA

From 2001 to 2012 I worked with local NGO CESESMA in the coffee-growing communities in the remote, mountainous north of the country.



Child labour on coffee plantations



The struggle for the right to education



I learnt to embrace a new approach to participation: "Protagonismo Infantil"



Children and young people organise, advocate, take the initiative

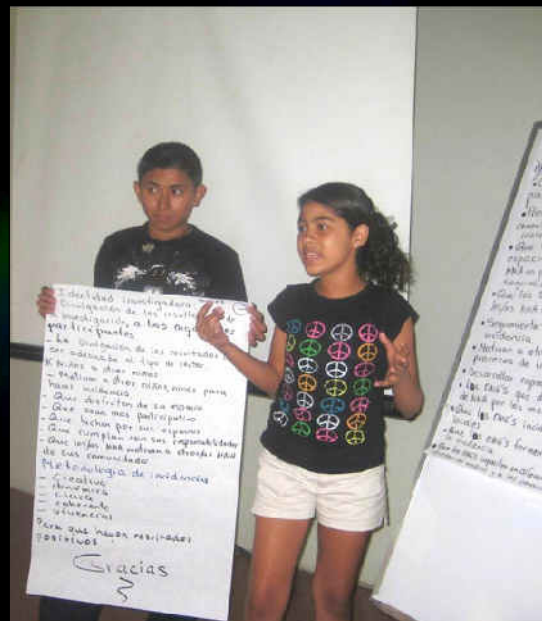


"Before, when they held the water committee meetings, only our parents were invited, not us, and our opinions weren't heard."

"Now young people are taking up positions in adult spaces, for example, in community associations and the Municipal Development Committee. They're there putting forward development proposals."



Adolescents interviewed in CESESMA research project



## Pathways to Participation



But how can we extend this to a modern, mainly urban, setting where people take it for granted that water will be delivered to their homes by big, generally impersonal, companies?



All citizen participation depends on the engagement of the citizens themselves.

But in my work with children and adolescents, I have always been interested in how we adults, can become effective facilitators – as opposed to manipulators – of their participation.

I saw the role of adult supporters and facilitators as central to almost all the participation practice going on (still is). I wanted to help people understand and reflect on this role.

At the turn of the Millennium, this led me to create *"Pathways to Participation"*

### Five levels of participation

### Three stages of commitment at each level

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
3. Children's views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

#### Openings >

An opening occurs when you or your team are ready and willing to work at this level

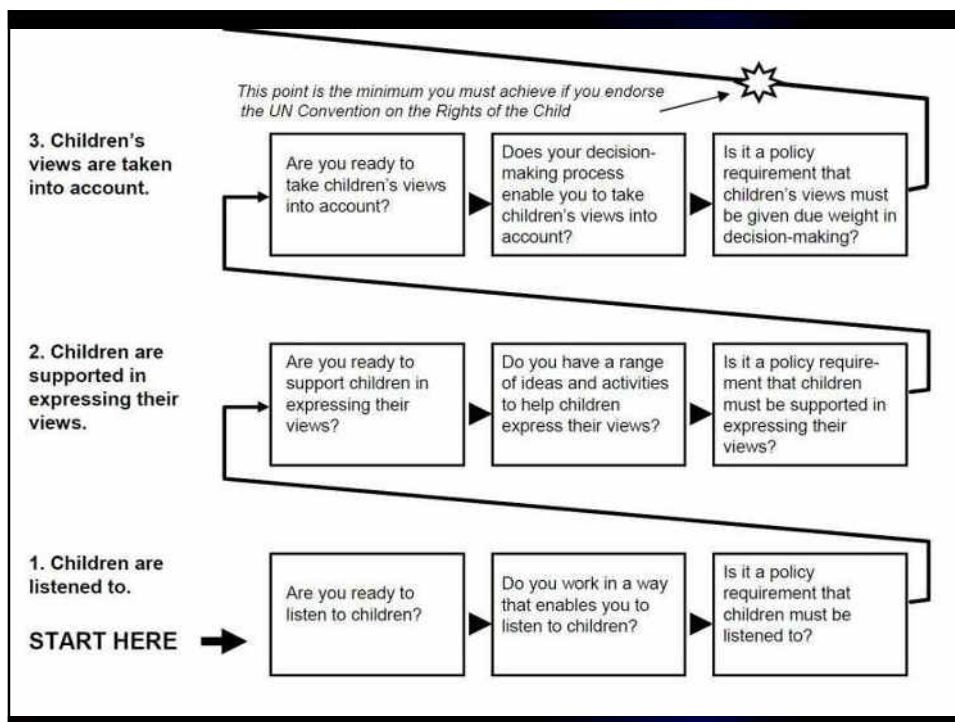
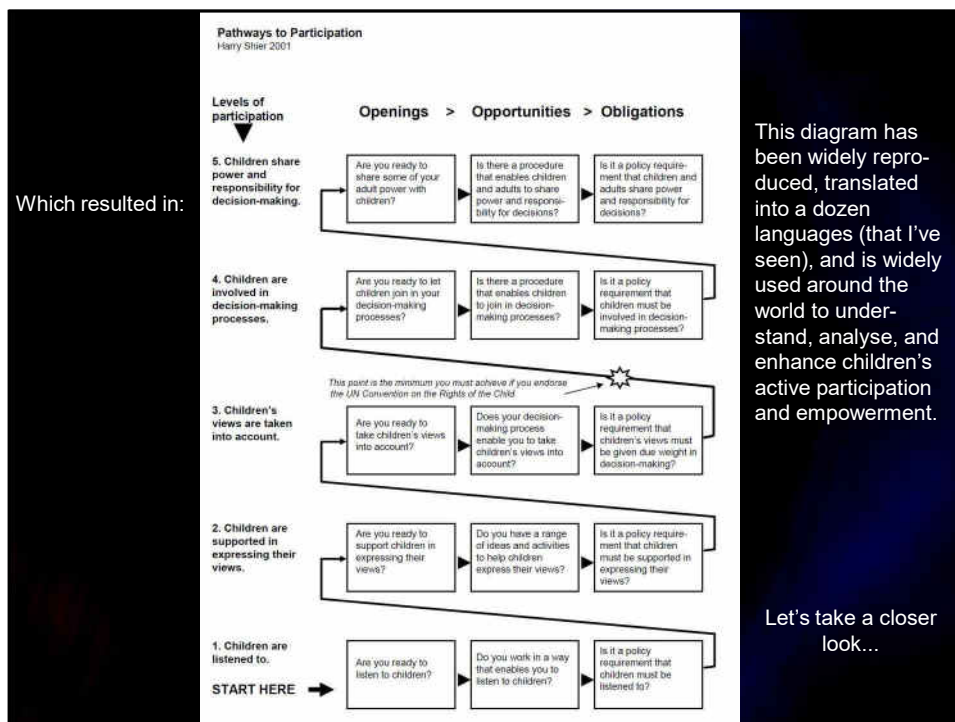
#### Opportunities >

An opportunity occurs when you have the skills and resources to be able to work at this level

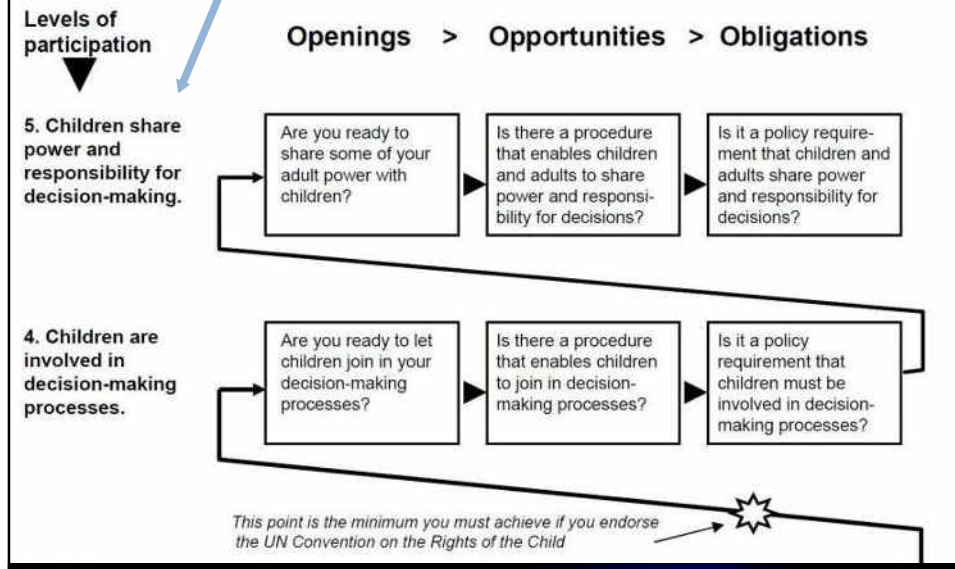
#### Obligations

An obligation is established when the organisation's agreed policy requires you to work at this level





Working to support participation at these higher levels is not an obligation, but once you embrace this approach, the benefits that flow from it go far beyond what is achieved at lower levels.



"Pathways to Participation" has been successfully adapted and extended it to many different areas of community engagement, especially in relation to those groups whose voices are least heard, or most blatantly ignored, such as:

- Elderly people in geriatric care settings;
- People living with HIV-AIDS;
- Adults with learning difficulties;
- Families with case files open with social services.

Table 1: Shier's model with modifications to make it applicable to an adult context (from Shier, 2001; 2006)

Level of participation	Opening	Opportunity	Obligation
1. Consulted and listened to	Are you ready to let others be heard?	Is there a procedure that enables others to be heard?	Is it a policy requirement that others be heard?
2. Involved in decision-making	Are you ready to let others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is there a procedure that enables others to share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?
3. Involved in decision-making	Are you ready to let others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is there a procedure that enables others to share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?
4. Involved in decision-making	Are you ready to let others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is there a procedure that enables others to share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?
5. Involved in decision-making	Are you ready to let others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is there a procedure that enables others to share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?

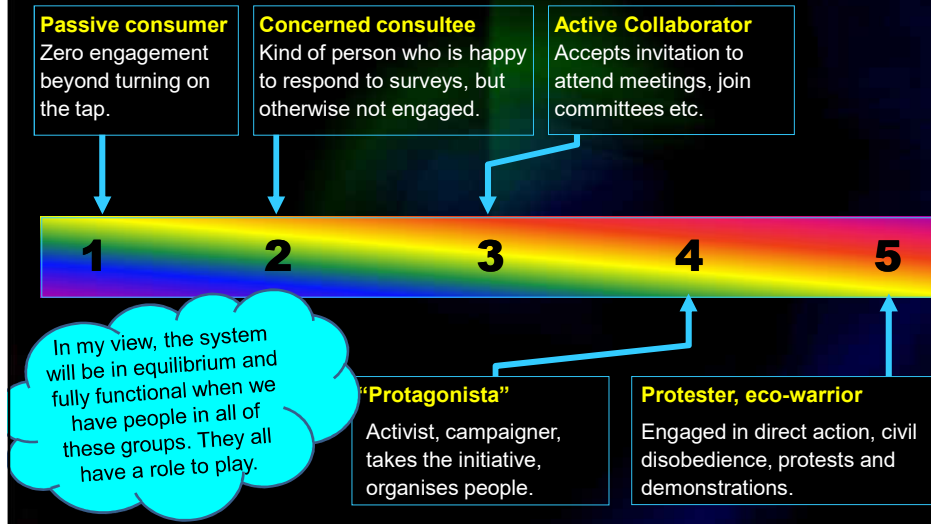
Figure 1: Model of Participation of PLINKs

Level of participation	Opening	Opportunity	Obligation
1. Consulted and listened to	Are you ready to let others be heard?	Is there a procedure that enables others to be heard?	Is it a policy requirement that others be heard?
2. Involved in decision-making	Are you ready to let others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is there a procedure that enables others to share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that others share some of your power and responsibility for decisions?
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### A spectrum of water customers ...

If we could imagine our ideal future water user, where would we place them on the following continuum?



...so, another question:

Are you interested in participation as empowerment, or is participation for you a disguised form of social control?

Or to put it in other words, do you see user participation as a valid expression of active citizenship, or as a crafty way to manage customers and their expectations?



### Children as consultants and transformative researchers



**A UK example from 1998**  
(before I moved to Nicaragua)

Child consultants commissioned by British Waterways to research the educational and recreational potential of the English canal network.



**2009:** Child workers from Santa Martha coffee plantation became consultants to research the relationship between business and human rights on the plantation

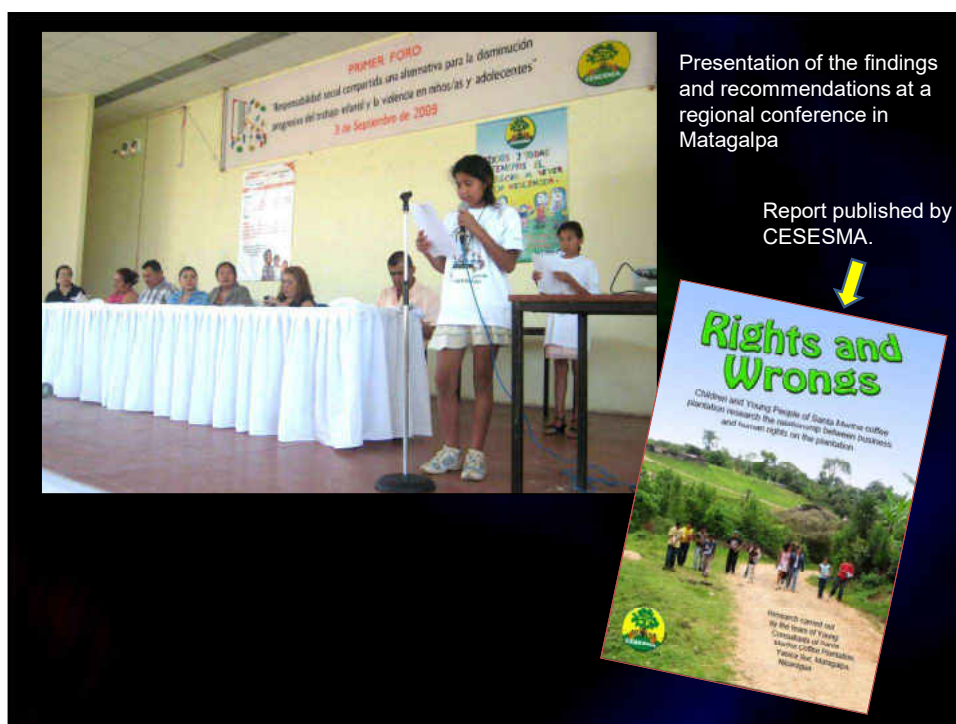


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Field research







**2012:** Children from Yúcul form a research team to investigate how alcohol is related to violence in their community.



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Planning



Interviewing



Preparing the report and recommendations

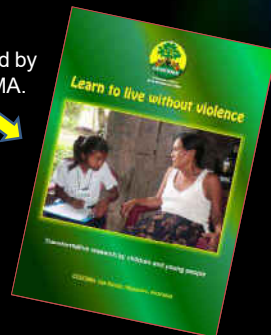


Young researchers' final report

Featured on national TV news



Published by CESESMA.



Local government and party officials made alcohol a priority for local action. They later admitted they had been aware for the issue for years, but it wasn't till the children came forward with their research that they felt forced to act on it.



This is neatly summed up in the title of a 2008 paper by  
Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa:

**“From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers”.**



### Concluding reflection



When a big water company tells me what to do  
(e.g. “Use less water”), I react, “Why should I? It’s  
only them looking after their own bottom line”.

But when I, as an active citizen in  
my own community, am engaged  
in a local Water Action Group (like  
the young people I worked with in  
Nicaragua), I cannot do otherwise  
than internalise and act on the  
moral imperative to care for the  
community’s water resources.



*“When the burning and the tree-felling increase, the water disappears”*

# THE END

*I made this presentation in London on 23 March 2017, the day after the Westminster Bridge terror attack. Learning of this that morning – a direct attack at the heart of democracy – I added an additional final reflection:*

“Democracy is not just a vote every five years; it is informed, committed citizens, capable of reflecting on the issues that concern them and making wise collective decisions that benefit themselves, their families and their communities.

Therefore promoting and supporting genuine citizen participation, particularly with children and adolescents, is not just good business, it is how we strengthen and defend our democracy.”



*Thanks for listening*

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