

20 'Pathways to participation' revisited

Learning from Nicaragua's child coffee workers

Harry Shier

Introduction

Work on children and young people's participation in the UK (and other northern countries) has tended to focus on one specific aspect, namely consulting children and young people around their use of public services. Much analysis has focused on labelling different modes and models through which such participation may be facilitated. The author's own 'pathways to participation' model is an example (Shier 2001; see also Kirby et al. 2003; Sinclair 2004).

By contrast, organisations working with children and young people in the global south, where there are few if any public services to access, have often taken different approaches, coming up with different models of practice, supporting and promoting more varied and developed forms of participation. In this context, children and young people are widely recognised as 'public actors', capable of influencing development (see for example Liebel 2007; O'Kane and Karkara 2007).

My experience of working with child coffee-plantation workers in Nicaragua for the past seven years (2001–8) has revealed how narrow was the concept of child participation that I had brought from my previous work in the UK.

This chapter will describe how children and young people organise and participate in Nicaragua's coffee plantations and surrounding rural communities, and how the team of community education workers at the local NGO CESESMA (Centre for Education in Health and Environment) supports and facilitates them. Analysing this experience can help us to identify some of the elements needed to construct a more comprehensive model of children and young people's participation and, as a result, be able to implement and facilitate a wider range of participation processes.

Children's life and work in Nicaragua's coffee sector

Some of the world's finest coffee is grown in the remote mountains of northern Nicaragua, 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. The globalised coffee market has little respect for the rights, much



Plate 20.1 Children picking coffee at Hacienda La Isla. Copyright: CESESMA

less the dreams, of these children. The consequence is a cycle of dependency, hunger and destitution in these remote mountain communities.

Nicaragua has, on the face of it, a legislative framework well constructed to support children and young people's participation, starting with the constitution, which gives full legal force to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is further institutionalised in the Children's Legal Code (1998), and the Citizen Participation Law (2003). These laws provide for children and young people to have voice and representation in various local governance spaces, including school councils and municipal children's and youth committees. In Nicaragua, however, what the law permits and what the people in reality have access to are very different. Children's right to participate may be guaranteed in law, but, for this to be meaningful, it must be actively demanded and defended at every turn.

CESESMA

CESESMA is an independent non-governmental organisation working with children and young people in this region. It was founded in 1992 as an environmental education action group and incorporated as a not-for-profit voluntary organisation in 1998. All CESESMA's management and staff are Nicaraguans, with the sole exception of this author, and most are local people.

CESESMA's mission statement is '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 has also adopted a statement of shared vision which is

of: 'Children and young people with greater self-esteem; with opportunities for an integrated education; taking control of their own development; capable of organising themselves to defend their rights and able to contribute to finding solutions for the social, environmental and cultural problems affecting their communities.' Important elements here are that children and young people are 'taking control of their own development' and are considered 'capable of organising themselves'. If they aren't already doing so, this vision implies a firm belief that they have the potential to do so, given a facilitative and supportive environment.

CESESMA's strategy of training and development of Young Community Education Activists (*promotores* and *promotoras*)

At the centre of CESESMA's strategy 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 defence of children's rights, through which they influence political processes at different levels.

The process of training and development of a *promotor/a* typically has five stages which are described below. To bring them to life, we will follow the personal stories of two young people, Deybi and Heyling, both of whom picked coffee on the plantations from an early age, and were aged 16 when interviewed in November 2007.

Stage 1: Children from age 6 upwards join out-of-school activity groups in their village community, which are run by already-trained and experienced promotores/as

Groups currently active are:

- organic farming and environmental action groups
- folk-dance groups
- mural-painting group
- young radio reporters' team
- youth theatre groups
- crafts groups: sewing and dress making, crochet, macramé
- girls' groups (all the other groups are mixed; the girls' groups exist specifically to give girls and young women their own space to work on issues of identity, gender, sexual and reproductive health and women's rights).

School is generally during the mornings only. Although most children work on coffee plantations, on family small-holdings, in domestic work or all three, they can generally organise their time so they can participate in activities that interest them. All activities are free and all participation is voluntary. There is no

advertising, as village communities are small and information spreads by word of mouth. Children who join these groups and attend regularly gain new skills, build friendships and grow in confidence and self-esteem. There are often noticeable improvements in their school work. It is important to stress that all the above-mentioned groups are organised and led by the young people themselves, not by adults, the only exception being two newly formed theatre groups.

CESESMA encourages the *promotores/as* who run these groups to talk with children about their rights: how, where and by whom their rights are not respected, and what they, as children and young people, can do about it.

Following the personal stories of Heyling and Deybi: in 1999 Heyling, then aged 8, joined a folk-dance group run by a friend of hers in her home village of Samulalí. In 2002 Deybi, aged 11, joined CESESMA's children's radio project and became a local radio reporter, sending in regular stories from his village of Granadillo.

Stage 2: Children join a promotores/as' training course run by CESESMA, and thus themselves become promotores and promotoras

Children who are active members of these local activity groups learn quickly and, as their confidence and self-esteem increase, soon many of them decide that they too want to be *promotores/as* and share their skills with the other children of their community. At this stage they can sign up for one of CESESMA's three training programmes:

FOCAPEC: Training and Development Programme for Community Education promotores/as

This is a one-year course of monthly two-day workshops, with practical tasks and projects in between. The curriculum combines key issues and key skills. The key issues are: children's rights, participation, identity and self-esteem, leadership, gender equality, non-violence, environmental conservation and health. The key skills are: group work, group organisation and leadership, communication skills, conflict resolution, community appraisal, community organisation, and influencing decision making.

FOPAE: Training and Development Programme for Ecological Agriculture promotores/as

This is similar to FOCAPEC, but with an emphasis on the environment, nutrition and sustainable agriculture.

Girls' and Young Women's Network training programme

This programme has an emphasis on women's rights, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive health. This is the option for those girls and young women who want to work with other girls and young women in their community on these issues.

The target age-group for all three programmes is 12 to 16.



Plate 20.2 Girls' and Young Women's Network training programme, Samulali.
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The educational approach of the *promotores/as*' training programmes is based on a four-stage learning cycle model, derived from Kolb (1984) and adapted by CESESMA to emphasise collective action for social change (Figure 20.1).

Both Deybi and Heyling soon decided that they were ready to share their knowledge with others, and so opted to join FOCAPEC courses in their home districts: Deybi in 2003, aged 12, and Heyling in 2004, aged 13.



Figure 20.1 Four-stage learning cycle (after Kolb 1984)

Stage 3: New promotores/as, organised in a community Promotores' Network, multiply their skills and knowledge with other children and young people in their communities

At this stage, typically aged 13+, some work alongside more experienced *promotores/as*, while others quickly form new groups. All become members of the district Promotores/as' Network, where CESESMA provides support and back-up, and ongoing training and development opportunities. However, our aim is to reduce their dependence on us as much as possible, in its place encouraging autonomy and mutual support among the network of *promotores/as* in the area.

By 2006, Heyling was active in the local Girls' Network, helping organise a girls' group in her village. About the same time she also started a dress-making course. Deybi organised a local children's group in his village to share the skills and knowledge he had picked up on the FOCAPEC course. He also learned macramé from local *promotores* and started teaching this craft to children in his group.

Stage 4: Promotores/as become active in community action for development, and in advocacy and defence of children's rights

Organised in the Promotores' Network, aware of the key issues, with developed skills and confidence, the young *promotores* get involved in a wide range of development and campaigning activities including:

- participation in school councils, community children's and youth committees, and as student representatives on school management committees;



Plate 20.3 Children's crochet group organised and taught by a young *promotora*.
Copyright: CESESMA

- 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 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 such as spraying pesticides;
- the theatre groups devise, produce and present original plays which expose issues of violence, abuse and exploitation to get communities talking about them;
- through its young reporters' network, the children's radio team raises awareness of children's rights abuses, encouraging and publicising action in defence of children's rights.

Deybi, at age 15, was elected co-coordinator of the Promotores' Network in his community. 'It's a big responsibility,' he explained, 'being in charge of all the work that has to be done: organising, promoting, mobilising, supporting, instructing.' He also became active in national initiatives, including the National Children and Young Workers' Movement (NATRAS). Heyling continued to play a lead role in the Girls' and Young Women's Network in her district, helping to organise women's rights workshops with local girls' groups.



Plate 20.4 Children and young people participating in a district Education Planning Forum in La Dalia. The forum was a key step in drawing up the Municipal Education Development Plan. Copyright: CESESMA

Stage 5: The most capable and committed promotores/as join CESESMA's area teams.

The three area teams, one in each of the districts where CESESMA works, are the main coordinating bodies, responsible for planning, organising, monitoring, follow-up and evaluation of CESESMA's work in the district. The teams are made up of young *promotores/as*, their ages currently ranging from 11 to 20. The three team coordinators are themselves local young people, currently aged 20 to 23, employed by CESESMA as full-time Community Education Workers. The teams themselves seek new members from among the active *promotores/as* in their district. They try to maintain representation of all the village communities that make up the district, and also a balance between the different ages, interests and activity groups.

All the work of the young *promotores/as* is voluntary, including the responsibility taken on by the area teams, whose commitment is often virtually full-time. This presents complex issues for CESESMA.

We do not pay them a salary. This is partly because we don't have the resources, but more importantly because we have always insisted that they do not work for us. What they do, they do for the good of their community and for the defence of their rights as children and young people.

On the other hand, as they grow up, they need to survive and this means earning a living. For most this means agricultural work on a coffee plantation or a family small-holding, while for others it means moving to the city in search of work. Thus, by relying solely on voluntary commitment to fuel development, the communities are losing some of their most valuable human capacity.



Plate 20.5 Area team meeting, La Dalia. Copyright: CESESMA

CESESMA responds to this in two ways. Where young *promotores/as* want to pursue secondary or technical education, we can sometimes provide them with a small bursary to make this possible. Another option is our programme of support for small production initiatives, or micro-businesses. Here we support young *promotores* in setting up their own small enterprises in the community. These currently include poultry farming, bee-keeping, and dressmaking. This enables many young *promotores*, who would otherwise emigrate or drop out, to remain in the community, dividing their time between their own small business and their community work.

Heyling joined the Samulalí Area Team in 2007, aged 16. At about the same time, with CESESMA's help, she and two other young women started a small dress-making business. Deybi joined the La Dalia Area Team the same year, and became one of five partners in a poultry farm.

These five stages explain CESESMA's central strategy. It is a renewable and sustainable cycle, with children constantly joining, many going on to become *promotores/as*, and involving new groups of children in community activities. While this work with children and young people is the heart of our work, its success depends on the adoption of an integrated or 'whole community' approach. Therefore CESESMA works in parallel to build alliances with parents, teachers, community leaders and local officials.

Reflection: ten key learnings

How can this experience contribute to our understanding and conceptualisation of children and young people's participation, and what can it offer to practitioners in the UK and other contexts?

1 It is a long-term process promoting personal development

The CESESMA approach is a process of personal development over years. We can see this process unfolding in the stories of Deybi and Heyling. It is not a hit-and-run 'Let's get a group of young people together for a participation project' approach. Therefore we should not be surprised that, over time, participants develop impressive levels of competence, awareness, confidence, organising ability and communication skills; in short, empowerment.

2 Recognising children's capability and competence is a good starting point

We start from an unshakeable belief that children and young people are capable and competent. They have expert knowledge about their lives, their families, their communities, their hopes and fears. The tools they have available for analysis of this information may be limited to start with, but this is due to lack of educational opportunities, not lack of capability, and their local knowledge is no less valid and valuable.

3 Children and young people's roles as educators in the community

A *promotor* or *promotora* is an educator, organiser and activist, and for many the emphasis is on the role of community educator. Young people form and run activity groups, sharing their knowledge and skills with others, leading to what we call the 'multiplier effect'. In this, CESESMA's approach has much in common with 'child-to-child' or peer-learning models. These peer-learning groups are the platforms that lead to community action for change, and the collective defence of children's rights.

4 Children and young people as community leaders

CESESMA's work is leading to a growing recognition that children and young people can have a leadership role, an element rarely seen in Northern contexts. At the same time, it is challenging traditional leadership styles with new ideas about who is a leader and their role in the community.

5 Children and young people as advocates and defenders of their rights

Central to this approach is a strong children's rights focus, which implies moving from a needs-based to a rights-based approach (see Save the Children 2002). It also implies organised action by children and young people in the promotion and defence of their rights. Among the rights local children and young people identify as priorities are the right to quality education, the right to live without violence, the right to participate and have a say in their community, and the right not to be mistreated or exploited at work (the need to work, at least part of the time, being taken for granted).

6 Self-organisation, proactivism and autonomy

CESESMA promotes models of self-organisation, joint organisation, and children and young people's engagement in adult-dominated spaces; all of which have a role to play in the promotion and defence of children and young people's rights.

7 Capacity to influence decisions in adult-dominated spaces

Young people increasingly take on roles as elected representatives, delegated to represent their peer group in adult-dominated decision-making spaces, which inevitably involves challenging adult attitudes. When participation becomes fashionable, the tendency is for adults to permit young people's participation without believing in its value. This is the road to tokenism. For this type of participation to be effective and non-tokenistic, the young people need to be empowered to set and pursue their own agenda for change.

8 *Direct action: campaigning, protest actions and using the media*

When children and young people are supported in taking a lead in direct action, there is always a risk of manipulation by adults. Marches and protests are fun, so it is easy to persuade children and young people to lend their numbers to a cause that is not theirs, to hand out T-shirts and baseball caps, or to provide flags to wave. On the other hand, if children and young people have their own organisation and leadership, including spokespeople who can handle the media and make it clear that it is a cause they believe in, direct action can be hugely effective in working for change.

Young people's community theatre is a powerful communication medium in campaigns and protests. Youth theatre groups supported by CESESMA have performed original plays in support of local and national campaigns against child abuse, corporal punishment and exploitation of child labour on the coffee plantations.

Children and young people can also take control of the media in an organised and effective way; for example, the young people's radio project that CESESMA supports. Their weekly programme *Children and Young People's Voices Heard*, has been running continually for five years on local radio.

9 *Adult roles in facilitating and accompanying these processes*

The adult support role needs to be handled sensitively and skilfully so as to offer appropriate support with the aim of encouraging autonomy and reducing dependence on adult facilitators. In order to do this the facilitator needs to know:

- When do I tell the young people what to do?
- When do I help them to decide what to do?
- When do I back off, so they can facilitate the process themselves?

Adults working in these processes need training, specifically looking at their own attitudes and learning practical techniques of process facilitation.

10 *Adult recognition and valuing of children and young people's action*

CESESMA's impact evaluation (CESESMA 2003) shows that adults recognise the contribution children and young people are making to the community, and this is the biggest factor in winning adult support for the promotion of children and young people's rights. What is even more striking is that adults are also recognising that learning is a two-way process; that sometimes they might even learn things from their children.

This contributes to changing adult attitudes so that respect for children and young people's rights is no longer seen as a threat to the established order, but rather as bringing real benefit to the community as a whole.

My children have developed. Now they can relate better to other people, adults as well as other children. They take responsibility for the workshops

they run and they all participate. One runs a dance group and the others are involved in the organic farming workshops. They relate better to the community.

(Parent, Samulalí, quoted in CESESMA 2003)

Conclusion

The CESESMA experience shows that ‘participation’ is bigger, broader, more varied and more complex than previous analyses have suggested. One of the big challenges for adults aiming to facilitate non-tokenistic participation beyond a limited local level is to ensure that children and young people are not manipulated into serving adult agendas. CESESMA’s experience suggests that one way to achieve this is to support children’s gradual ‘bottom-up’ processes of learning, sharing, organising and mobilising, so that when children demand a voice in the big decisions that affect their lives, they arrive at the table as a force to be reckoned with.

To illustrate this final learning, I present the following visualisation of children and young people’s participation, drawn up by a group of Nicaraguan participation workers in 2007 (Figure 20.2). This is followed by a visual account of their work produced by the Young Consultants Team of Santa Martha coffee plantation (Figure 20.3).

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The Participation Tree

By the "Building a Children's Rights Culture" working group, CODENI, Nicaragua, August 2007
Translated from the original Spanish by Harry Shier

To understand the tree, start at the roots.

The fruits: Respect, equality, respect for human rights, development, peace

The leaves of the tree: Children and young people empowered

- Children and young people as community educators
- Children and young people in community development
- Children and young people supporting others in difficulty
- Children and young people as defenders of children's rights
- Children and young people reporting abuse and exploitation
- Children and young people in educational policy and planning
- Children and young people as renewers and defenders of traditional culture
- Children and young people as spokespeople and representatives in local democracy
- Children and young people as protectors and defenders of the environment
- Children and young people in their own groups and organisations
- Children and young people in direct action for social change
- Children and young people in media and communications
- Children and young people as mediators of conflict
- Children and young people as a new generation of community leaders.

The branches of the tree are the various activity groups and spaces in which children and young people gradually develop their active and pro-active participation in tune with the growth of their knowledge and experience

The seed from which the tree grows is the family home: the first setting where the child learns to participate and be a part of the community



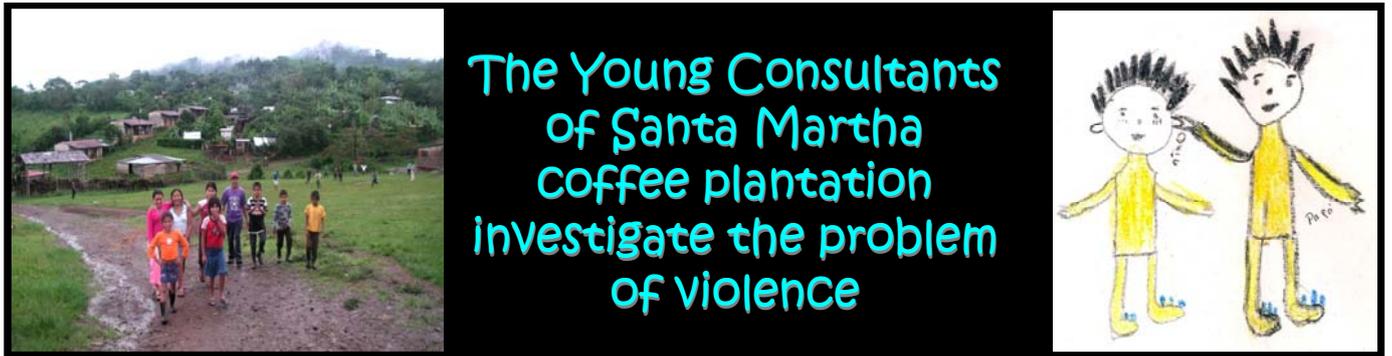
The trunk: The strong central trunk that holds up the whole tree is made up of all the learning processes through which children and young people gain awareness of their rights, raised self-esteem, awareness of themselves as members of society and rights-holders, as competent and capable of achieving anything in life; ability to express themselves and to organise.



The growing seedling is strengthened by attendance at organised activities outside the home: That's to say, the child becomes a "Participant".

Fertile soil: Participation is rooted in the children's rights focus and the legal framework that guarantees these rights: Children's Rights Code, UNCRC

Figure 20.2 The participation tree



We are 11 children and young people from the community of Santa Martha. Now we are from 12 to 18 years old but when we became consultants a year and a half ago we were aged from 10 to 17. We were all attending the primary school in our community and were in third to sixth grade. Now two of us are in secondary school.



Our community, Santa Martha, is a coffee plantation. It is in the area called Yasica Sur, which is part of the municipality of San Ramón in the Department of Matagalpa, Nicaragua.



During the coffee harvest we all work on the plantation.

Some of us work all year round looking after the coffee plants.



This is the story of how we became consultants and presented the findings of our research at the National Conference "Violence against Children: A global problem, a Nicaraguan response" in the capital city Managua in August 2007.

To start off we had a meeting with our mums there so everyone was in agreement about the work we were going to do as consultants. The mums gave their permission and chose three of them to accompany us to Managua. At this stage we didn't really know what it meant to be a Consultant.



At the start of the first workshop we did drawings of violence we've experienced in the community. Then we showed each other our drawings and each of us talked about the different kinds of violence we had drawn.



Then we read and discussed a booklet about the 'United Nations Special Report on Violence Against Children',



Then we planned the research we were going to do with the other children from our community. We decided what questions we were going to ask in the interviews with the other kids.



And this is how we became Consultants.

The agreement was that each of us would interview at least five other kids about their experience of violence. We asked them about the violence they had experienced and the types of violence they knew about. We interviewed a total of 59 children and young people



Here is Consultant Nestor interviewing Mara about how she is being mistreated.

Then we met for a second workshop to discuss the findings of our research and agree on conclusions about the children's experience of violence in the community, in school, in the coffee fields, in the home etc.



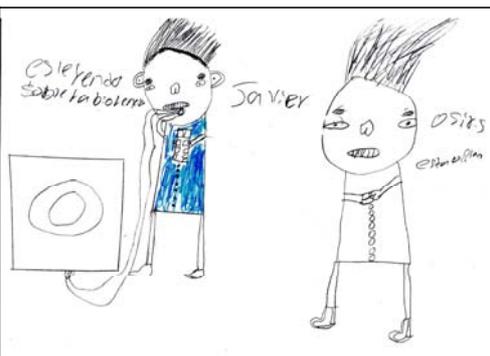
We drew up our recommendations to reduce violence: What each group in the community should do: parents, community leaders, teachers, plantation overseers and foremen, the government, and ourselves the children and young people.



Figure 20.3 Young Consultants Team of Santa Martha coffee plantation investigate the problem of violence



In the last workshop we went to the CESESMA office in San Ramón to put together our final report.



We practised the presentation we were going to do in Managua with the computer and projector. Each of us took a turn to practise our part using the microphone. Then we made plans for the journey to Managua.

The day of the journey we met in Santa Martha. Richard, the driver, took us as far as La Praga in the pick-up truck. There we changed to the minibus.



We had lunch in Matagalpa town. We arrived in Managua in the afternoon and went to look at the Crowne Plaza Convention Centre where we were going to make our presentation the next day. We had dinner and slept in a hotel

The next morning we got up and had breakfast.



Then we went to the national conference.



We did our presentation; each one took the microphone to read their part.



Here we are, reading our parts about violence

Then Arlen presented three questions on cards to the Minister for the Family. The questions asked her what she was going to do to reduce violence against children.



Later we gave the same three cards, of different colours, to everyone. Then we collected the cards to make a display of the commitments that the adults had made with the children and young people of Nicaragua.

We closed off the side doors so when the adults left the conference hall they saw the commitments they had made in writing.



We slept another night in the hotel in Managua and the next day we went home to Santa Martha. A couple of weeks later we had an evaluation meeting to think about the experience. Here are our reflections about the experience of being Consultants.

What did we learn from the experience?



We learnt to do things that adults do, like being Consultants. We learnt to speak in public without being embarrassed. We learnt how we can all help to reduce violence, and who we can turn to for help. We learnt that we are all equal: nobody is bigger than me. And we learnt about how people live in the capital, for example eating with knives and forks.



Did the adults take us seriously?

We think they did, because they gave us the opportunity to do our presentation, and the adults were paying attention when we made the presentation. Even the Minister for the Family took us into account, because she accepted the three cards and answered our questions. Also our parents let us participate in the workshops and go to Managua. Although the people at the conference in Managua took us seriously, we realise that the problem of violence continues in Santa Martha. There's a lot of work still to do to eliminate violence in Santa Martha.



What would we say to those adults who say that children can't be Consultants because they don't know anything and will be manipulated by the adults?

We would tell them they are very much mistaken, because we can too. They should stop abusing their power and give us the space. Put us to the test and they'll see if we can or not.



How did we feel when it was all over?

Happy because of all the new things we saw and all the things we learnt, and because we had contributed to the reduction of violence. Sad because it was over and we weren't going to meet again.

Our message to other children and young people who want to be consultants:

They should join the groups that CESESMA runs. They should speak out about those who violate their rights. Tell the truth and don't be scared.

- Axel*
- Roberto*
- Nestor*
- Osiris*
- Junior*
- Jorling*
- Arlen*
- Brenda*
- Scarleth*
- Brenda Yadira*
- Ervin*
- Jossabeth*