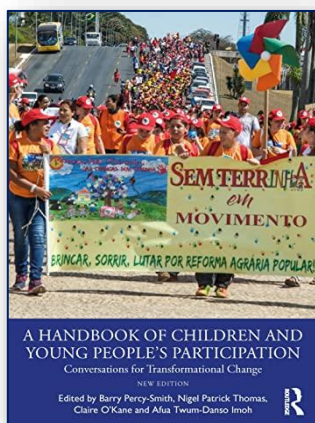




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Learning from Experience: *Sistematización* of ten years of action-research by children and adolescents with CESESMA in Nicaragua

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Introduction

CESESMA is a community-based children's rights organisation based in San Ramón in the coffee-growing region of Nicaragua, where the CESESMA team has been supporting action-research projects by children and adolescents since 2007. The experience of the first team of child consultants in Nicaragua was featured in the first *Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation* (Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2010), and by 2018, eleven such projects had been completed.

In 2020, as COVID-19 shut down direct work on the coffee plantations, the CESESMA team took advantage of the lull in community activities to undertake a *sistematización* of the past thirteen years' experience. *Sistematización* is a popular Latin American action-research methodology where a group of people who have lived through a shared experience come together to recount, capture, and reflect on that experience in a structured way that enables the key lessons to be acknowledged, explored, analysed and re-formulated.

To share key insights, this chapter is structured in five sections. Following this introduction, the next section introduces the methodology of *sistematización*. The third section describes how the CESESMA team applied this approach in practice, the fourth outlines key learnings, and is followed by a brief conclusion.

Sistematización

In Latin America, a *sistematización* process is often led by a skilled facilitator, but a team can self-facilitate the process if its members have the necessary skills. While it is common for *sistematización* to be done by a team of co-workers, it is preferable to involve other people who have been part of the shared experience in different roles. In particular, in projects working with children and adolescents, a *sistematización* done by adults and children together is considered stronger than one done just by adults.

Though the method is flexible and adaptable, the process usually follows a simple framework. As it is a group process, it is common to create a giant wall-chart using multiple flipchart sheets (or whatever is

available) where summaries of shared information can be made visible to all. Whilst it is easier if all participants are able to read, this is not essential, as – being a collective process – there is always a collaborator on hand to read out what goes up on the wall.

Step 1: Describe the lived experience. This is often done by describing what happened along a timeline, and this in turn may help the group to divide the experience into a number of stages or phases.

Step 2: Describe relevant aspects of the context or conditions, in particular those that facilitated or obstructed progress at each stage.

Step 3: Describe what was achieved or outcomes observed at each stage.

Step 4: Discuss difficulties encountered at each stage: both those that were eventually overcome, and those that proved limitations to success.

Step 5: Review the whole chart and start a shared exploration to identify the most important lessons learnt; in particular those that might help others doing similar work or aspiring to similar goals.

While there is a substantial methodological literature on *sistematización* in Spanish, literature in English is limited. However, discussion in English can be found in Jara Holliday (2012), Sarmiento & Herard (2015) and Tapella & Rodríguez-Bilella (2014); while an example of an earlier *sistematización* by the CESESMA team can be found in Shier et al (2013).

CESESMA's *sistematización* process

Under normal circumstances, the CESESMA team is active on a daily basis in village communities, schools and coffee plantations across its large rural catchment area. However, as the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions on community activities, it became evident that the team would not be able to carry out its existing work plans. In the context of rural Nicaragua, moving activities online was not a feasible alternative, so the team began a dialogue with its funders on an alternative work-plan, which led to the proposal for a *sistematización* of the action-research projects completed by and with children and adolescents over the previous 13 years.

The *sistematización* included eleven projects:

- 2007 **Young Consultants of Santa Martha Coffee Plantation Investigate the Problem of Violence.** This was the first experience of "Children's Consultancy" in Nicaragua, using a method originally developed by the *Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme* in the UK (Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2010).
- 2008 **Perceptions of violence towards children and adolescents in rural communities.** A similar method was used to support children investigating violence in neighbouring rural communities (CESESMA, 2008).
- 2009 **Violence against indigenous children and adolescents.** A team of young consultants was formed in the indigenous community of Samulalí to investigate how violence affected their families and communities (CESESMA, 2009).
- 2009 **Young Consultants of Santa Martha research the relationship between business and human rights on the plantation.** Two years after their first investigation, the Santa Martha team reformed for a new project (Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2011).
- 2009-10 **Children and Adolescents Defending our Right to Play.** Three action-research teams explored the reality of the right to play in the coffee zone; then came together to spearhead a campaign in defence of this right (Equipo de Investigación-acción Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Defendiendo nuestro Derecho a Jugar, 2009).

- 2010 **Young consultants investigate environmental education in rural schools.** Four teams of young consultants looked into the practice of environmental education in local schools and made recommendations for improvement (unpublished report available on request).
- 2010 **How children and adolescents influence policy-makers.** In this national research project funded by Irish Aid, child and adult researchers collaborated to analyse case studies where children had proven success in influencing local government policy (CESESMA-UNN, 2010; Shier et al, 2014).
- 2011 **Learn to Live without Violence.** Four teams of child researchers were supported in pursuing self-chosen research topics linked to the problem of violence in rural communities (CESESMA, 2012b).
- 2011 **Children and adolescents follow up UN recommendations:** Three teams of young consultants created a child-friendly version of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's "Concluding Observations" to the government of Nicaragua, as a tool for campaigning on children's rights at national and local level (Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Consultores/as, 2012).
- 2012 **Rural children's views on sexuality and sex education.** Four teams of young researchers investigated what rural children knew about sex and sexuality, and what they felt they needed to know, with a view to developing a new approach to education on sexual and reproductive rights in rural communities (CESESMA, 2012a).
- 2015-16 **Children's Rights in School:** A team of child researchers investigated their fellow-students' perceptions of children's rights at school (Niñas y Niños Investigadores, 2014; Shier, 2016).

A team of 12 people was formed to carry out the *sistematización*. The core group of 6 was made up of five current members of CESESMA's team, with one former member (Shier) brought in on a voluntary basis. It is worth noting that two of this group had first become involved with CESESMA years previously as teenage *promotores/as* (Shier, 2010), and on the basis of that experience had gone on to become full-time staff members.

A second group consisted of six young adults who years earlier as children or adolescents, had themselves been "young researchers" or "young consultants" in some of the action-research projects being reviewed. This group joined in the latter stage of the process to discuss the overall learning from their experiences. However, it is important to note that this was for practical reasons due to the COVID restrictions, and there is no methodological reason why they should not have been involved from the outset and throughout the process.

Given that the whole process was organised online, mainly using Zoom, we did not use the traditional giant wall-chart to summarise the evolving picture, but developed an alternative approach. We created a format to capture the details of each individual piece of action-research, then a sub-group of two or three people reviewed all the available information to generate a complete description of each one. As the larger group then reviewed and discussed these individual pieces, the bigger picture emerged. Team members took turns to take detailed notes, which were compiled and shared between sessions. All this was done during a series of weekly two-hour Zoom meetings from August to October 2020. In November the group was expanded bringing on board the former "young researchers" for a broader discussion of the learning from these experiences. These young people mainly stayed in their home communities or plantations, where local CESESMA workers facilitated access to cellphones and WhatsApp as the main means of participation.

On completion of the *sistematización* report (CESESMA, 2022), the team went on to develop a practice manual with guidance on how this approach can be adapted and applied by other teams in diverse contexts (Shier and Hernández Méndez, 2021).

Findings and learnings

Reinforcing earlier learning

Before considering new findings from the *sistematización*, it is worth noting how the findings served to corroborate and strengthen learning identified in CESESMA's previous work initially outlined in Shier (2015), including:

- The importance of skilled facilitation and good technical support for young researchers;
- The nature of "empowerment" as a combination of capacity, opportunity and self-belief; and how it can be supported;
- The "four transformations" that occur in the course of such experiences: (1) empowerment of the young researchers, (2) transformation of family and social attitudes, (3) reflexive learning that transforms attitudes, perspectives and practices of adults working with children and (4) transformative social change through action in society;
- The value of an action plan drawn up by child researchers themselves to propel dissemination of their findings and push for action on their recommendations;
- The need for institutional commitment (and allocation of resources) to implement the action plan.

New learning

1. *The use of children's drawing as a method, not data*

Opportunities for child researchers to make drawings of an issue they intend to research has proved an effective way to enable children to get to grips with an issue in the initial stages of a project. It is important to emphasise that in transformative peer research – in contrast to psychological research – children's drawings do not provide research data, but are used as part of the research methodology. The drawings are a tool to help children collectively explore what they already know about an issue, how they understand it, and how new knowledge (the product of research) might help them to improve the situation.

2. *"Transformative Researchers" is not just a label*

In the early projects, the participating children were referred to as "Young Consultants", following the example of the earlier "Children's Consultancy Scheme" in the UK. However, over time this changed to "Transformative Researchers", and the *sistematización* revealed the importance of this shift.

A "consultant" researcher is generally an outsider, brought in to provide special expertise. However, as the Nicaraguan projects progressed, it became clear that a different model was in play, as here the child researchers were very much insiders. Rather than bringing their expertise to a new, unfamiliar context, they were investigating aspects of their own communities, their own schools, and their own way of life. The change of label therefore marked a significant conceptual shift from researcher as outsider to researcher as insider.

3. *The challenge of child safeguarding and the importance of working in solidarity with parents, family and local community*

CESESMA's work has always centred on defending children's rights, preventing violence, and denouncing abuse and exploitation; focusing on both commercial exploitation in the coffee industry, and sexual exploitation in families and communities. However, prior to 2010, there was little understanding of the importance of codifying the policies and practices involved in keeping children safe. Starting in 2010, however, CESESMA undertook a participatory process to develop, adopt and implement a child protection policy and programme, custom-made from the ground up with participation of all stakeholders including children and adolescents (CESESMA, 2012c).

Though child safeguarding is important in all aspects of CESESMA's work, the need for a robust rights-based approach to child protection became more critical as young researchers – entirely of their own volition – began to investigate sensitive, taboo or divisive issues (domestic violence, alcohol, sexuality, the coffee industry etc).

Following CESESMA's established way of working, the work-plans for all action-research projects included engagement with the parents of the children involved, and the communities in which they lived. Principally this was done through parents' meetings at the start of each project. In the small rural communities where CESESMA works, it was relatively easy to visit parents and invite them personally to these meetings, which provided an opportunity to raise parents' awareness of the issues their children had chosen to investigate. The meetings always included discussion of what the children were planning to do, how they would carry it out, how they would be supported and accompanied (and by whom), and the measures that would be in place to ensure their safety. Though it was not always necessary, home visits were arranged where parents had specific concerns about their child's involvement, or where the child had additional support needs. The CESESMA team also engaged with local teachers and community leaders, often through one-to-one conversations, but where appropriate, by organising an additional meeting.

In those projects that involved children living and working on coffee plantations, there were also discussions with representatives of the plantation's management, encouraging them to focus on the benefits the project would bring to the community, rather than any threat to their business.

Though this community engagement was important in every project, it came to the fore when child researchers investigated sensitive issues, especially perceptions of sex and sexuality. Traditionally this was a taboo subject, seen as something children should not be involved in. To avoid a backlash from elements of the local community, the CESESMA team made unprecedented efforts to bring parents and families on board. To do this, they had to help parents understand how accurate, age-appropriate knowledge of sexuality, far from putting children at risk, can protect them in many ways (helping to prevent sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancy, sexually-transmitted infections, early marriage, etc).

4. Adolescent promotores/as supporting child researchers

For many years CESESMA's work has focused on the training and development of young community education activists, referred to in Spanish as *promotores* (boys) and *promotoras* (girls). In the first edition of this handbook, Shier (2010) describes this approach in action. In all the projects listed, these adolescent *promotores/as* played a key role supporting younger children as researchers.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought enormous challenges, but also generated opportunities, including this *sistematización*. The forced closure of programmed activities created space, time and resources to look back in a planned, structured way at a process of evolution that had been occurring at CESESMA over the past 13 years; an opportunity all too rare in the busy modern world.

The added value that this brought to the work has been outlined in the preceding section, and is explored in more detail in the full report in Spanish (CESESMA, 2022). One final learning, however, comes from the testimony of the six young adults who had participated in these projects as children years before, and who took the opportunity to look back and reflect on what it all meant for them.

To share their stories in full would need another book, but it is fair to say that all had made positive choices in their lives, influenced by those early experiences of being young consultants or transformative researchers. All had grown into leadership roles within their communities and continued to be active in working for social change. Their reflections included:

"I understand about abuse of power, about the pressures we face to show that we are men. I've understood that *machismo* is not good, it causes pain. All people have rights, no matter whether they are big, small, men, women." (Young man participant)

"I know about violence towards women. I've been able to share information about domestic violence at school and in the community. I share with other young women; I learn from them and they learn from me." (Young woman participant).

"We developed an action plan, and based on this we organised marches, murals, banners, and now we have knowledge and skills for personal and community development." (Young woman participant).

"Research strengthens our leadership; knowing that we are young people recognised in our communities, and that we do not remain silent about the situations that happen in the communities. We are the support people for those families who experience violence, because we know how violence affects people." (Young man participant).

We acknowledge that these young adults were invited to engage in this process because we were still in touch with them and knew they were active in their communities, so we cannot say to what extent their experience is representative, much less claim to measure the scale of the phenomenon they represent. However, we do know the phenomenon exists; that is, when children engage with a participatory action-research project in their community, the experience can play a part in positively shaping the future course of their lives. To explore this further would be an exciting new research project.

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