

Part Two: Navigating the tensions



Harry Shier
Centre for Children's Rights,
Queen's University Belfast

...and CESESMA, San Ramón, Nicaragua



2007-08: International research project on “Non-governmental Actors in New Governance Spaces: Navigating the Tensions”



International research team:
England, Wales, Bulgaria, Nicaragua

“Practitioner Fellowship”:
An opportunity to explore current thinking about children as public actors, comparing Nicaragua and Great Britain.



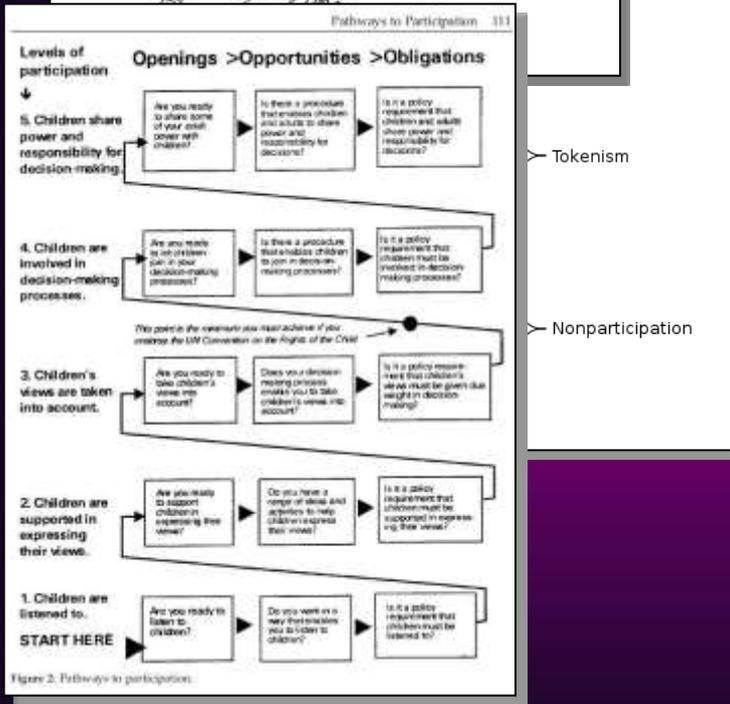
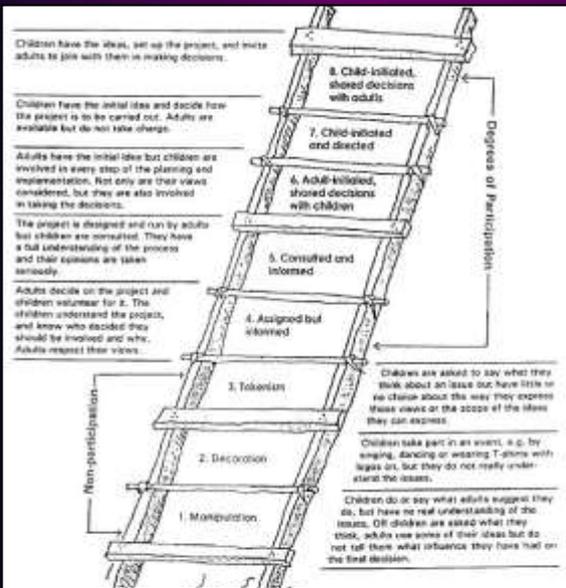


Figure 2. Pathways to participation.

“Pathways to Participation”, and other models like it, are nowhere near adequate to conceptualise the complex and multidimensional reality of children and young people’s participation in society, covering, as it must, every conceivable setting from the family home to national and global governance institutions, and within these settings, levels and styles of engagement as unique and diverse as the children and young people themselves”.

Field research 2007-08: Semi-structured taped interviews with leading experienced practitioners in Nicaragua and Great Britain

1. Their background
2. Key ideas that guide or influence their thinking about participation, with concrete examples.
3. Factors that determine the effectiveness of children and young people's participation.
4. Challenges they face in promoting and facilitating children and young people's participation.

Findings:

Some differences between Nicaragua and the UK

1. Emphasis on child as service-user (consumer) in the UK. But not in Nicaragua, where services have to be fought for, rather than simply consumed.
2. In Nicaragua, effectiveness of participation seen to lie in the capacity of the children and young people involved. In the UK, effectiveness seen to depend on the capacity, resources and commitment of the facilitating NGO.
3. In the UK, resourcing and time issues seen as major challenges to be faced. In Nicaragua the main challenges were search for new methods, new opportunities, and extending participation into new settings.

But, on the whole, what emerged were a number of key issues or tensions that were common to both countries:

Children as public actors



Navigating the Tensions



First group: Tensions between participation as social control and participation as liberation



Tension 1

The child as
consumer
(service user)



The child
as activist

In the UK:

“In our organisation, as with all the other NGOs, there is a move to become more businesslike, therefore young people are seen as service users, which is the same as the consumer model”.

But also:

“A good example of the potential is the way children and young people reacted over the Iraq war: That was a very strong reaction by children and young people who were on the streets campaigning to say this was something they felt very strongly about”.

Tension 2

Adult's agendas

(often those of
governments or
authorities)



Children and young people's agendas

“Children’s issues do not set the agenda. Policy issues set the agenda, budgetary constraints set the agenda, council priorities set the agenda; but children’s own real life issues don’t seem to set the agenda. I would love to say there are a thousand and one ways we have managed to get children to set the agenda, but we haven’t”.

(UK participation worker)

Tension 3

Consultation



Shared decision-making



“The link has been made between participation and consultation, and people think that if you have achieved consultation then you’ve achieved participation, and it is very much an adult agenda: We go and talk to children and young people, they tell us something, and then we go and carry on doing whatever it was that we were doing.”

(UK participation worker)

Tension 4

“Invited spaces”

(Power of the adult to invite participation or otherwise)



“Popular spaces”

(Also known as “claimed” or “created” spaces)

“Having the kids in the Local Authority Committees is to condemn them to keep quiet, because they discuss a lot of topics that don’t interest them, that they don’t have expertise on, that they haven’t really got to grips with. It doesn’t relate to their own experience. It has worked out better to give them their own spaces”.

(Nicaraguan participation worker)

“It starts from the children and young people’s own groups. First amongst themselves to gain skills and develop their competence; first working with their peers, then the family, the local community, and then the local authorities”.

(Nicaraguan participation worker)

Tension 5

Reactive
participation



Pro-active
participation

(Known as “protagonismo”
in spanish)



“We sometimes respond to government consultations, but we make a clear distinction between young people’s leadership, and being consulted. Young people decide what their campaigns are and then pursue them.”

(UK participation worker)

“Many Local Authorities and NGOs still haven’t got past this type of participation where they make the plans and design the projects and then incorporate children and young people into them. We’re looking for more pro-activism”.

(Nicaraguan participation worker)

Tension 6

Manipulated
voices



Autonomous
voices



“Have you genuinely engaged with children and young people; have you genuinely listened to them; have you recorded their actual views, or has the adult recording their views changed them to put them in the language of the Council or the Committee or something?”

(UK participation worker)

“The leaders, when they see a child who is more eloquent, more sharp-witted, who is able to speak, to express themselves; they assume the child has been manipulated”.

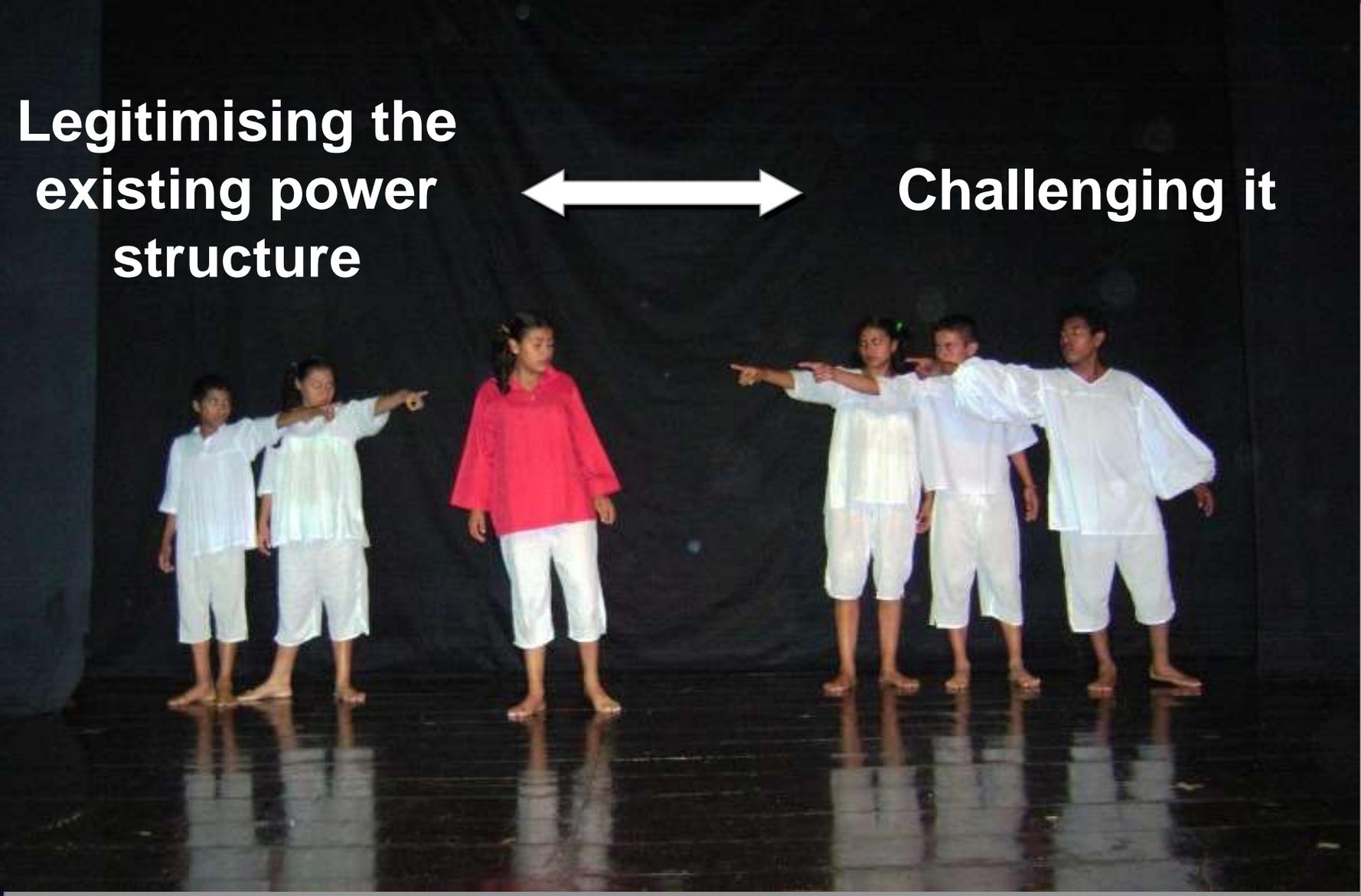
(Nicaraguan participation worker)

Tension 7

Legitimising the existing power structure



Challenging it



“It’s important to respect institutionality and what that represents. Children have to respect the state institutions and they do this through making their demands of them. If they demand a better school, that’s their right, but the demand itself legitimises the institution by demanding that it fulfils its obligations”.

(Nicaraguan participation worker)

Tension 8

A public
service
framework



A human
rights
framework

“I would like to think that we’re trying to take a rights based approach to how we view participation, rather than taking a consumer approach”.

(UK participation worker)

Second group: Tensions specific to children as a social group



Tension 9

“Youth
participation”



“Children’s
participation”

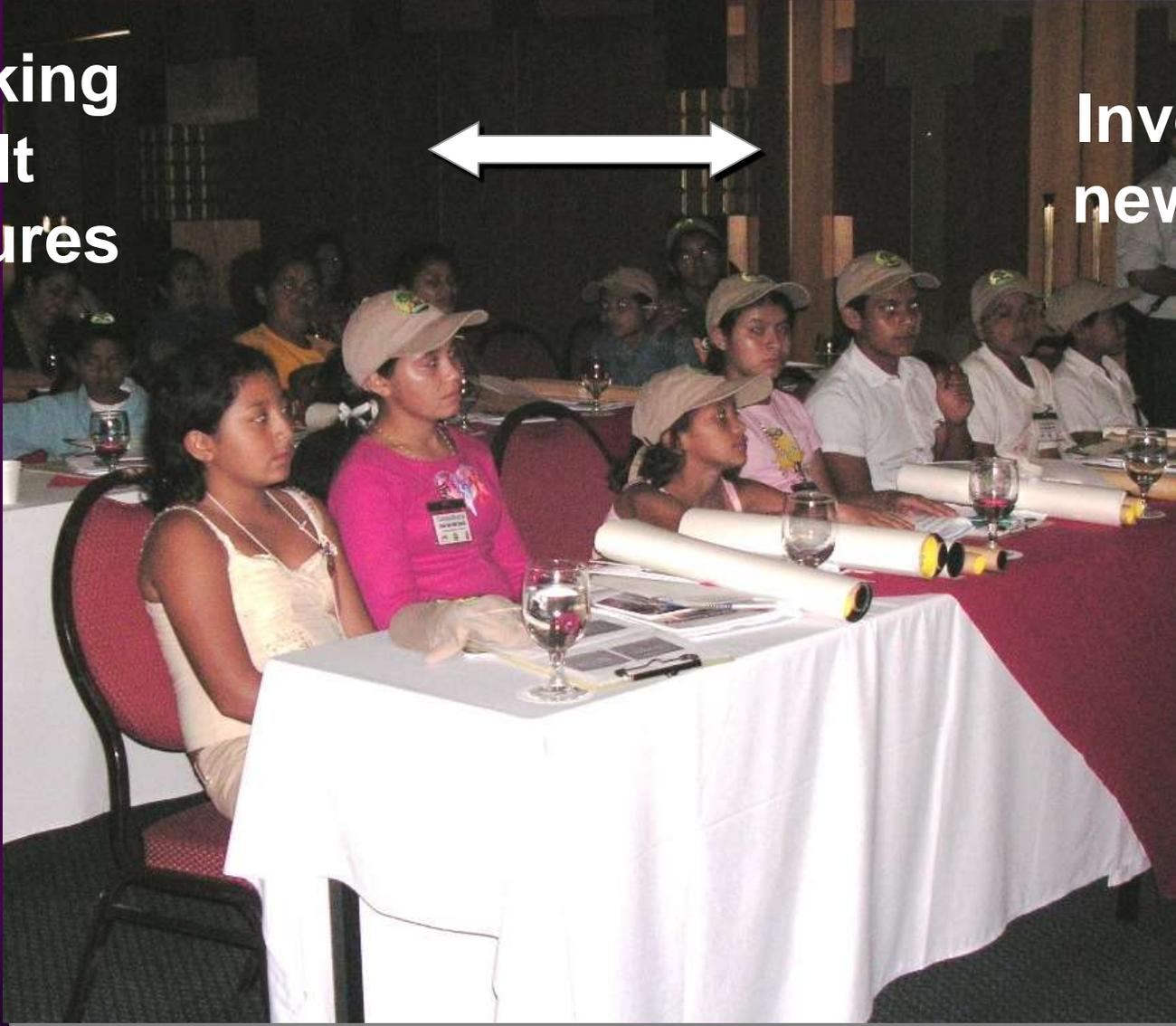


“It’s not the same promoting participation in little children as in teenagers”.

(Nicaraguan participation worker)

Tension 10

Mimicking
adult
structures



Inventing
new ones

“What we often do is construct structures that model adult structures, and that don’t necessarily provide a different way of doing things”.

(UK participation worker)

“The aim is to invent new modes of participation that respond to the kids’ own dynamics; and then convince the adults of the legitimacy of these new formats”.

(Nicaraguan participation worker)

Tension 11

Child
protection



Child
empowerment



“If we had a child-protection concern about a child at risk, we wouldn’t just talk to police or social services. Our approach would be to talk to that child and help them understand about the level of risk and the need to do something about it”.

(UK participation worker)

Tension 12

Local and
close-to-
home
issues



National
and
global
issues



“Trying to promote younger children’s involvement in national and local government decisions is less developed; not necessarily because of resistance, but trying to find structures and mechanisms to do that in ways that are meaningful for children”.

(UK participation worker)

“I believe we have abandoned participation at local community level. Children are learning to speak up in front of government ministers, but not in front of their own teachers. So now we are more interested in promoting participation in everyday settings like school and community.”

(Nicaraguan participation worker)

Tension 13

Extrinsic motivation

(doing something for reward or payment)



Intrinsic motivation

(doing something because it's worth doing)



“I think rewards are very important. We always give immediate rewards for taking part – small things that only cost a pound or so – to say ‘We valued your contribution’.”

(UK participation worker)

“We do not pay them. 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 defense of their rights as children and young people”.

(Nicaraguan participation worker)

Third group: Tensions between process and product



Tension 14

Getting a
quick result



Including
everybody



“We will go the extra mile to consult with excluded children, like going out to traveller sites”.

(UK participation worker)

“It takes a long time to work with children with complex needs. A lot of people say it can't be done, but we've done pilot projects that say it can be done, but it's expensive; it's labour-intensive”.

(UK participation worker)

Tension 15

One-off
projects



Long-term
development

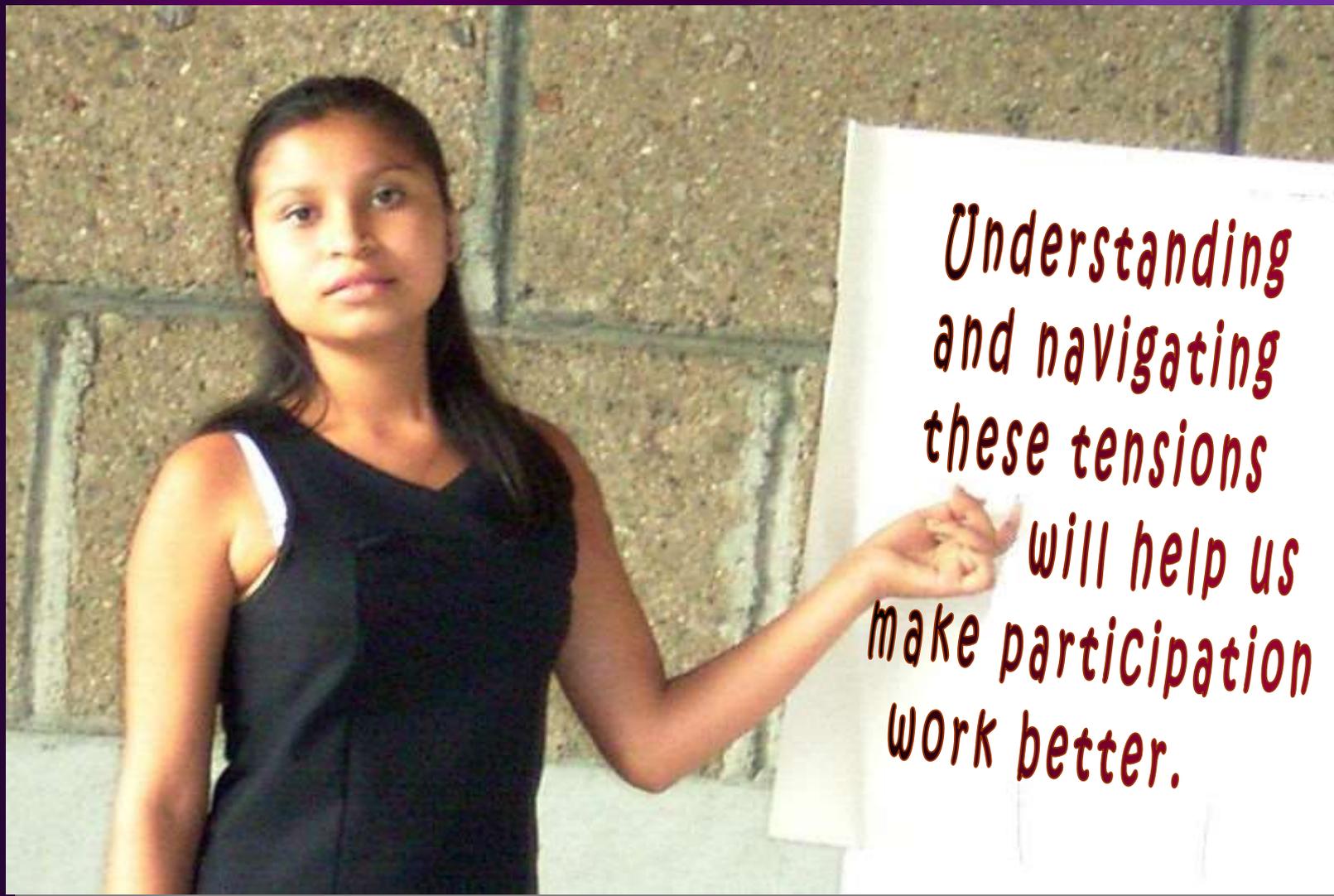


“There’s an obsession with task and performance: ‘We’ve got to get a decision made: If you can’t agree by the end of the meeting, I’ll have to go away and sort it out’, as opposed to seeing the process as more important. The question should be, ‘You weren’t able to make a decision in this meeting. Where does that leave us?’ ”

(UK participation worker)

“No one is born with participation skills, but one learns them. This learning is gradual and systemic. One learns to participate from one’s first years in the setting in which one is growing up which is the family, and then the school. As adults, we must facilitate conditions so that these capacities and competences are developed: self-expression, opinion, communication, access to information and knowledge, decision-making.”

(Nicaraguan participation worker)



Slutet. Tack för att lyssna