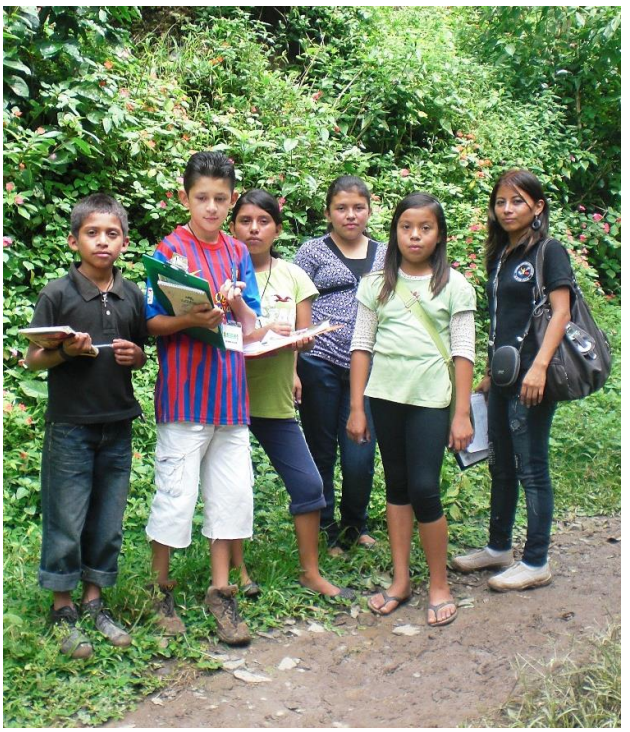
Should children and young people participate in tackling sensitive issues?



ChangeFactory

October 2026

Harry Shier

www.harryshier.net

Overview

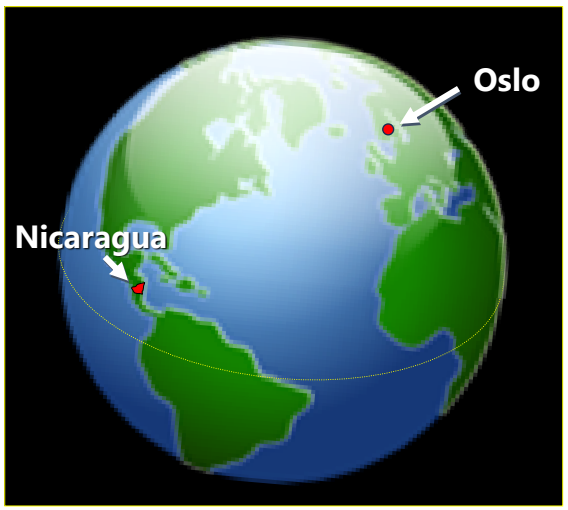
1. Children in the Nicaraguan coffee zone: the intersection of the margins
2. Children in the Nicaraguan coffee zone: human rights defenders and agents of change
3. Participation and protection: The right to be heard and the right to live without violence
4. Vulnerable or resilient?
5. Silenced or empowered? CESESMA's model of empowerment.



Photos by CESESMA, Nicaragua, featuring children and young people as active citizens, consultants, researchers, campaigners and human rights defenders, taken with informed consent of the young people featured, and reproduced here with their permission.

2

1. Children in the Nicaraguan coffee zone: the intersection of the margins





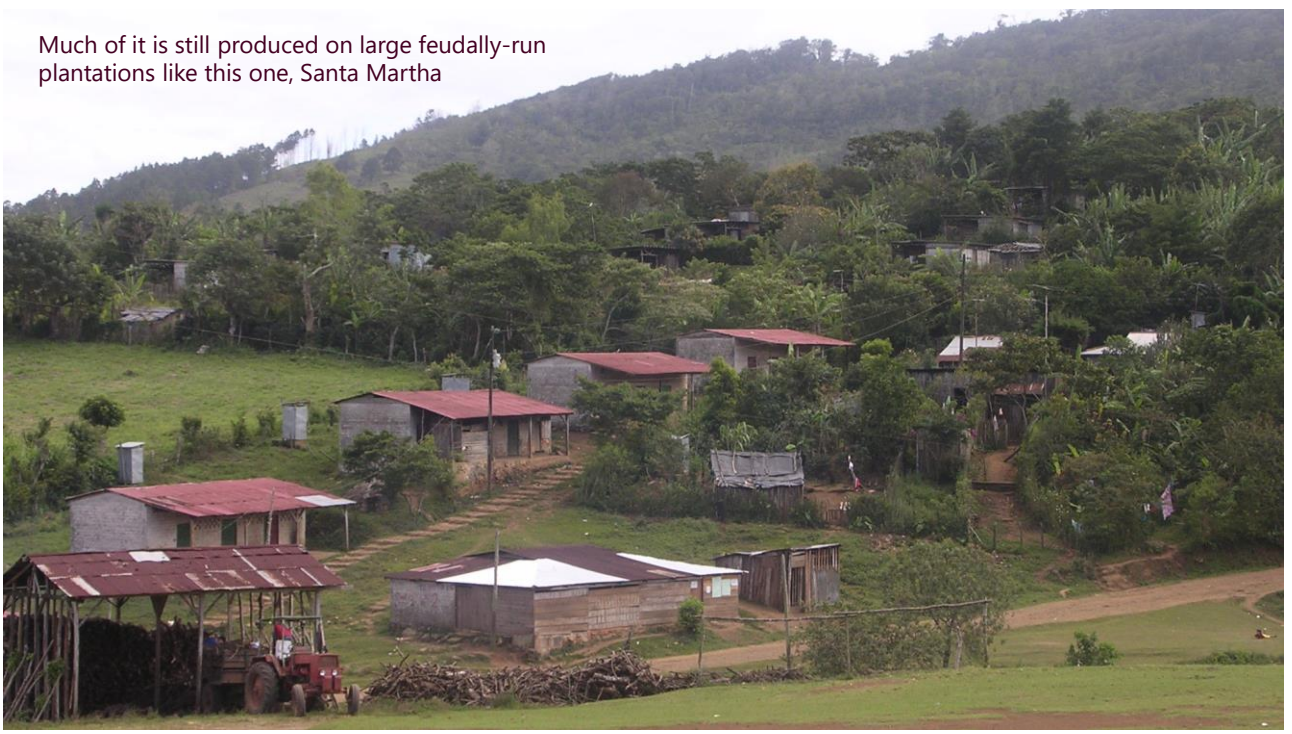
Tropical, rural, mountainous



Coffee is grown in the forests, protected by the partial shade of the forest canopy



Much of it is still produced on large feudally-run plantations like this one, Santa Martha







Harvesting coffee is highly labour-intensive. During the harvest period (November to February) many thousands of children work all day evey day picking coffee ...



…and sorting the red and green coffee berries.











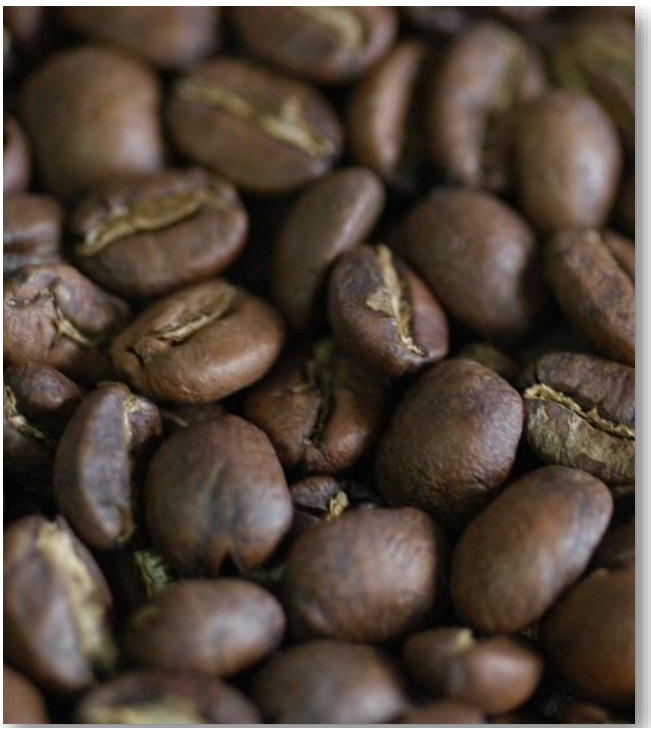
Contents of the sacks are measured at the end of each day, and registered workers are paid according to the quantity picked.

Children are not registered and not paid.

The first stage of processing, de-pulping the berries to extract the seeds, is generally done on the plantation.

The beans are then taken off to a processing plant for cleaning, drying and sorting.





They are then exported for roasting and packing.

Most of the added value goes with them. Most of the profit is taken in wealthy northern countries in North America and Europe.





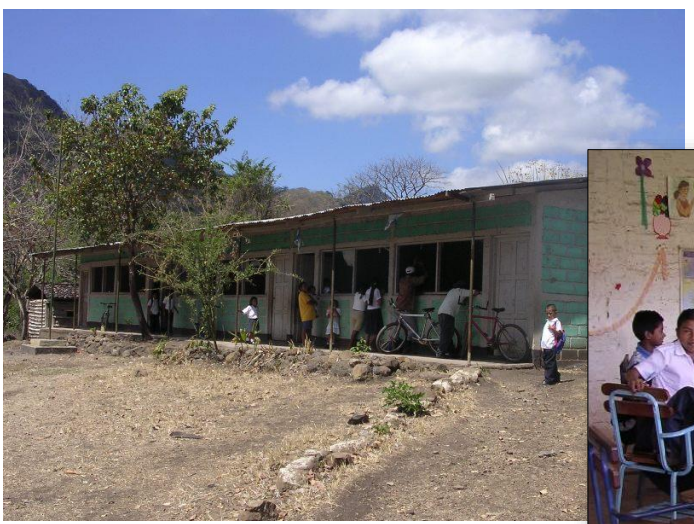
Living conditions are very basic

These are typical family homes



The basic diet is rice, beans and maize-flour tortillas.





Primary schools exist in most communities, but are under-resourced, poorly staffed, and often in bad repair

There are few secondary schools in rural áreas.



The children and young people that CESESMA works with live on the margins, not only of Nicaraguan society, but of global social discourse.

What is "**Marginality**"?

"An involuntary position and condition of an individual or group at the margins of social, political, economic, ecological, and biophysical systems, that prevent them from access to resources, assets, services, restraining freedom of choice, preventing the development of capabilities, and eventually causing extreme poverty"
(Von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014)



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These children are not just marginalised; they are multiply marginalised.
They live ***at the intersection of the margins:***

(a) They are children;

(b) living in geographically-isolated rural communities, with little access to the world outside;

(b) living in extreme poverty – by both absolute and comparative measures;

(a) in the little-understood intersection of being both child workers and school students, struggling to find ways to make this a viable option.
(Shier, 2017).



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And here, in the intersection of the margins, they live with perpetual risk and uncertainty:

- They lived with extreme **environmental uncertainty** in the form of natural disasters, the most impactful of which are **floods, tropical cyclones** (hurricanes), **droughts, wildfires, earthquakes** and **epidemics**, many of which cause catastrophic damage, and all of which are exacerbated by the effects of **climate change** *(Quesada Roman et al, 2026; Aizaga et al, 2025).*







The house of my grandparents-in-law in Matagalpa. Destroyed by a mudslide in 2006

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- Extreme **political uncertainly** with a polarised and unstable polity veering from right- to left-wing governments with corresponding policy changes and perpetual risk of civil conflict…
  (Thaler and Mosinger, 2022; Hagamos Democracia, 2024; Amnesty Interantional 2023)





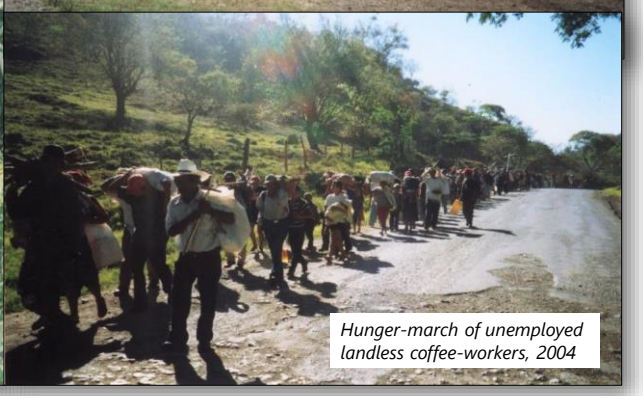


- … and extreme **economic uncertainly** due to monoculture of coffee in a fluctuating profit-driven global market, which, especially for landless families, means a constant risk of unemployment, relocation, poverty and hunger

  (Bacon et al, 2014; Quiroga et al, 2020).





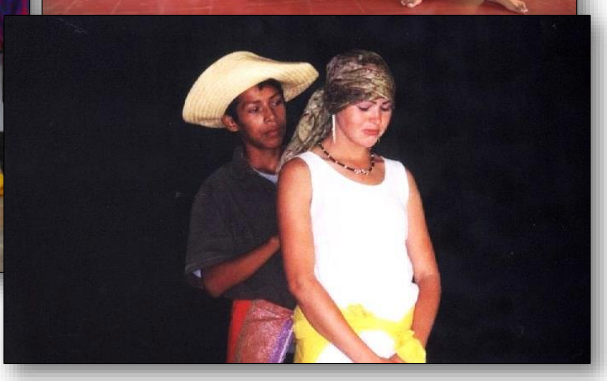


Hunger-march of unemployed landless coffee-workers, 2004

- Their communities are also characterised by **high levels of violence**, including domestic violence, and both economic and sexual exploitation *(Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2010; Amnesty International, 2010; UNHCHR, 2025)*







These photos are from youth theatre productions created to raise awareness and break the taboo around gender-based violence. They do not depict actual violence.

A chance to talk amongst yourselves:

Children's lives in the Norway are different in may ways to those of children in Nicaragua.

Yet even in the best-run society, certain children can find themselves marginalised, excluded and/or disadvantaged.

- In your experience, how do children come to be marginalised or excluded in your country?
- What kinds of crises, insecurity or uncertainty do they have to face?



You will not be asked to report your discussion in full.

But please be prepared to share any important points.

2. Children in the Nicaraguan coffee zone: Human rights defenders and agents of change

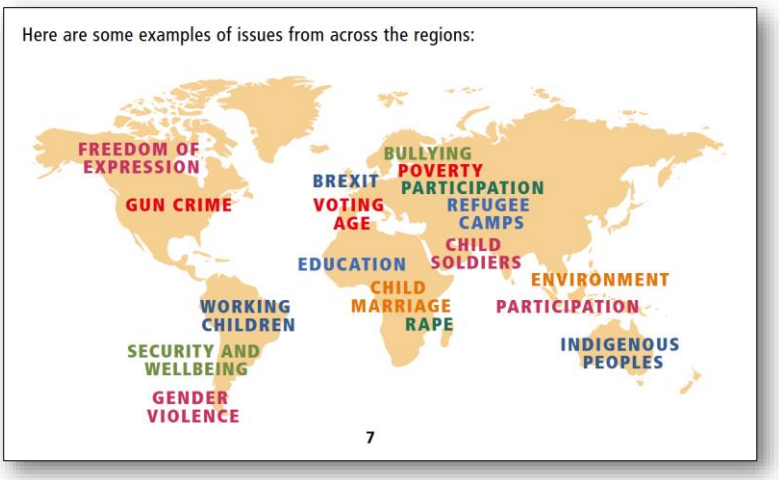


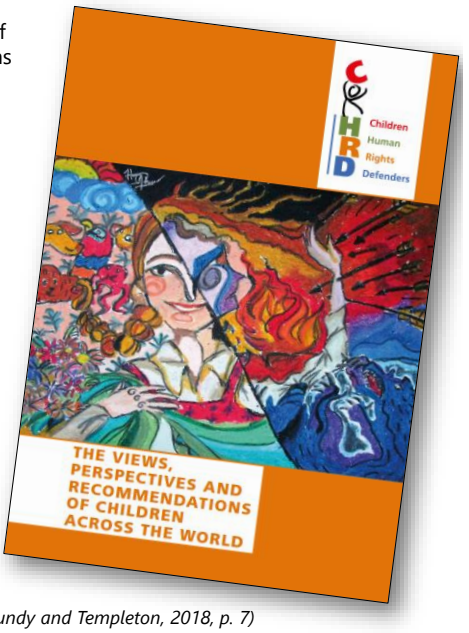


From 2001 to 2011 I worked with a local children's rights organisation CESESMA, supporting child workers on the coffee plantations in claiming and defending their rights. *(Shier 2010)*

While it would be easy to label the children of the coffee zone as victims in need of humanitarian aid, CESESMA focused on supporting them to become empowered as human rights defenders, advocates and activists for social change.

Children Human Rights Defenders (CHRDs) are children who take action to PROMOTE & PROTECT their own rights or those of others.





(Lundy and Templeton, 2018, p. 7)

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An important component of this work was supporting and facilitating child-led action-research; using this to understand and tackle the rights violations experienced by working children on a daily basis.



Often, these children and young people chose to investigate problems they experienced in their lives that adults would have labelled "sensitive" or "taboo". Here are some examples:

Case study 1: The young consultants of Santa Martha Coffee Plantation investigate the problem of violence on the plantation



2007: National conference on violence against children.

The organisers needed an expert to do the keynote speech. Who should they ask? Someone from UNICEF, or from Save the Children?

We said, "Why shouldn't children do the keynote speech? They are experts in the topic of violence against children".

And so a team of child coffee workers from Santa Martha coffee plantation became the first child consultants in Nicaragua.



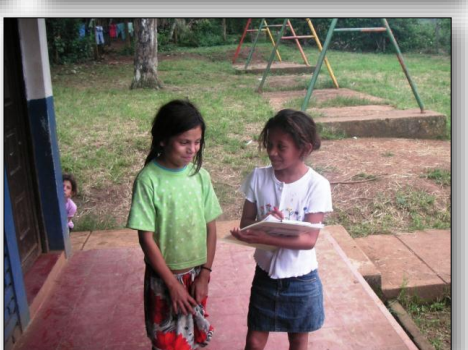




Preparation



Field research





Data analysis



Preparing a final report



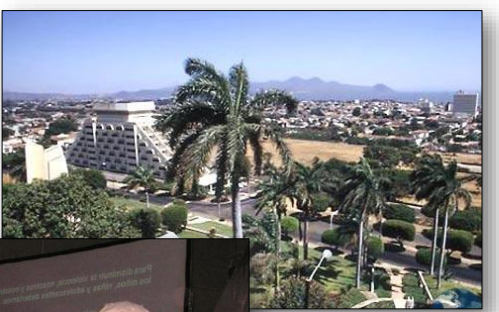
Drawing up recommendations



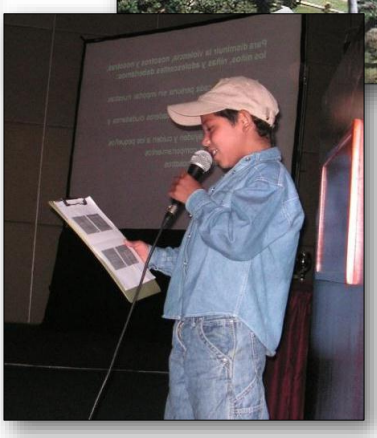
Rehearsing the formal presentation

Journey to the national conference in the capital city, Managua









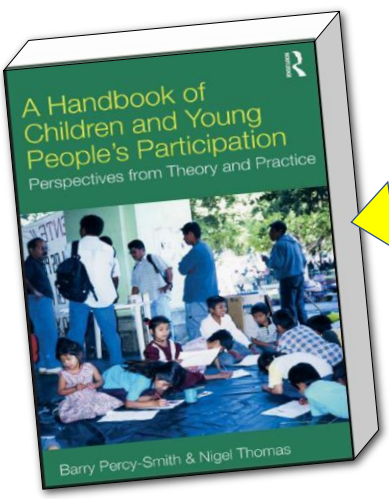


A direct challenge to the Minister for the Family...

...and to all the conference delegates



The following year the children retold their experience in words and pictures in *"A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation"*.



(Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010)

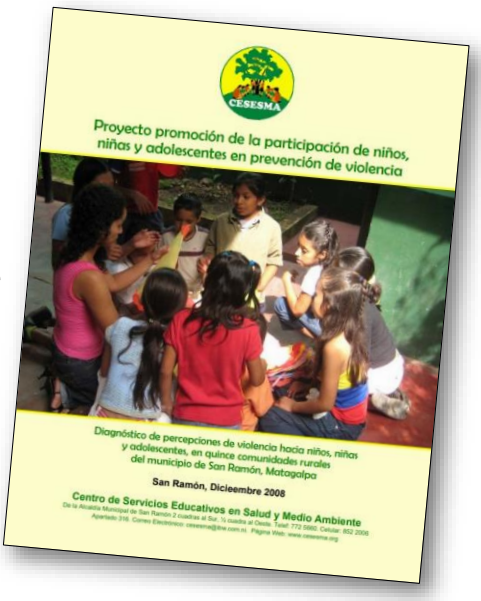


In the following years, several more groups of young researchers chose to investigate the problem of violence in their communities:



"Study of the problem of violence towards children and young people in the Samulalí district of Matagalpa" *(CESESMA, 2009)*

"Perceptions on violence to children and young people in 15 rural communities of San Ramón Matagalpa *(CESESMA, 2008)*



Case study 2: The young researchers of Yucul investigate the problem of alcohol in their community

Children from Yúcul formed a research team and chose an issue affecting their families and their community that they wanted to find out more about.



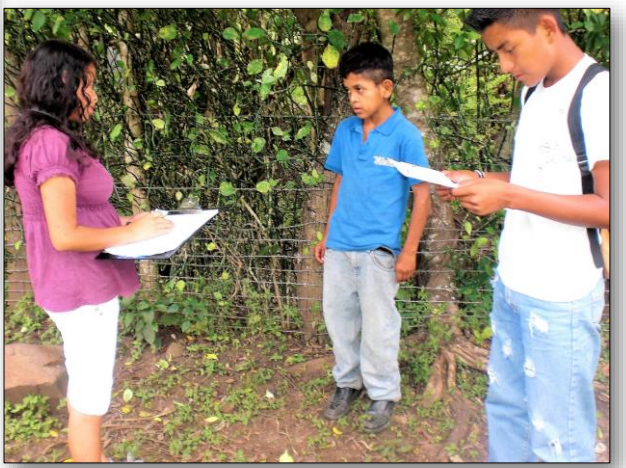
The topic they chose to investigate was how alcohol is related to violence in their community.

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Planning

Interviewing



35



Analysing data



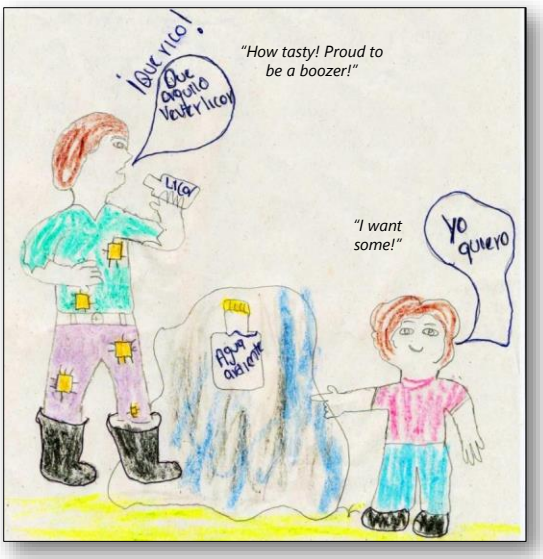
Preparing the report and recommendations



36

Follow-up and impact…

- The Young Researchers presented their findings to the government's 'Family Life and Security Commission', which decided to make the alcohol problem a top priority.
- Local government and party officials admitted they had been aware of the issue for years, but it wasn't till the children came forward with their research that they felt forced to act on it.



- The local police also took action; confiscating illegal liquor and closing at least two unlicensed cantinas.
- A national broadcaster heard about the children's work, and the team was featured on the national TV news.
- Following the news broadcast, the local authority and police have ensured no new liquor licenses are granted in the Yúcul area.

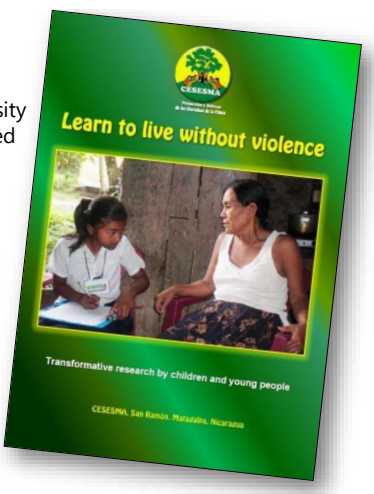
(Shier, 2015)

37

The Young Researchers' report was in this book published by CESESMA in Nicaragua in March 2012.



An English translation produced jointly by CESESMA and the University of Lancashire was launched in September 2012. *(CESESMA, 2012)*



This book includes reports from three more children's research teams on:

- Preventing violence in the home;
- The question of respect;
- Why do parents hit their children and how to prevent it.

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Case study 3: The young consultants of Santa Martha reunite to explore the connection between business and human rights on the plantation

2009: The Santa Martha coffee plantation Young Consultants' team reforms to research the relationship between business and human rights on the plantation



Field research

As well as other children, they interviewed parents, teachers, adult plantation workers and the plantation manager.









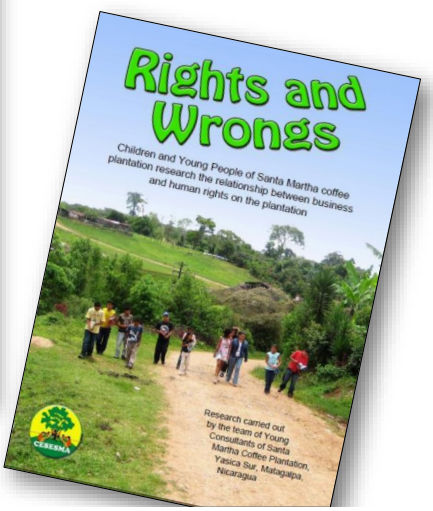
Preparing the report and recommendations





Presentation of the findings and recommendations at a regional conference in Matagalpa

Report published by CESESMA (2011)



3. Participation and protection: The right to be heard and the right to live without violence

ARTICLE 12

"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".

The right to be heard

ARTICLE 19

"States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child".

The right to be safe

As adult duty-bearers, we don't get to choose between the two:

- We cannot **silence children** in order to avoid risk.
- Nor can we **put children at risk** in order to hear their voices.
- **It is our responsibility to uphold both rights.**

How do we uphold both rights?

There is now a significant literature on this topic, and we can see how thinking has evolved…

Should we choose one over the other?

Should we encourage children to participate?

Or should we protect them from harm?



- All too often, this means silencing children's voices as it is believed that this will protect them form harm.
- This view is still prevalent among some professionals, for example in social work and disability services.

(Van Bijleveld et al, 2015; Dillon et al, 2015; Brady and Franklin, 2019).

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Should we balance the two rights, so as to have a bit of both?



We can't deny either of these rights.

How much participation can we risk?

How much protection do we need?

How do we ensure the correct balance?

(Coyne and Harder, 2011; Robinson, 2024)

45

Or should we see protection as a necessary condition for participation?



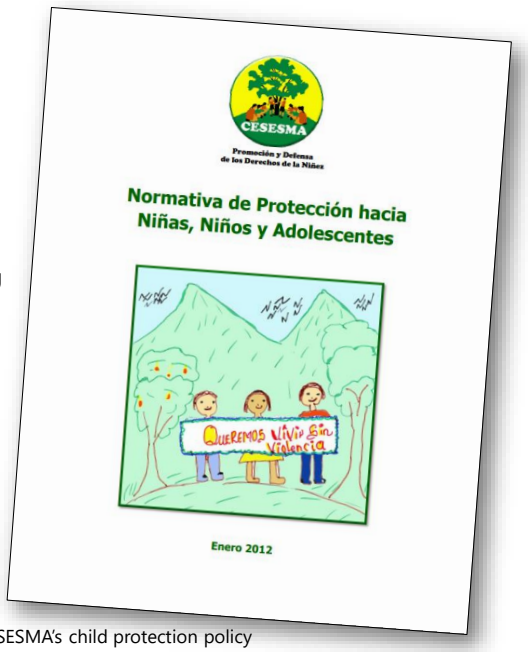
Protection must be in place in order for participation to be safe and effective.

(Bradbury-Jones, 2014; Mitchell et al, 2023)

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Participation IN protection:

Children and young people can participate in developing safeguarding policy and practice.



CESESMA's child protection policy *(CESESMA, 2012)*

There are many examples of children and young people participating in decision-making on policy and practice for child protection systems and services, and in international development and humanitarian interventions

(Dillon et al, 2015; Dan et al, 2019; Križ and Petersen, 2023; Ruiz Casares et al, 2017)

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Protection THROUGH participation:

(AKA: "Safeguarding through involvement"



When children speak out on issues that concern them, rather than suffering harm as a result, they contribute to their own safeguarding, whether by:

- empowering themselves;
- defending their rights;
- raising adult awareness;
- improvements in protection mechanisms, policies and practices,

... or all of the above

(Newman, 2005; Moore, 2017; Tusla, 2024; Shier, 2026)

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This can also involve a public advocacy and activism approach, described as, "**Children claiming the right to live without violence**"

(Križ and Petersen, 2023; Shier, 2023; Petersen et al; 2025).



CESESMA Youth Theatre group use drama to raise awareness of domestic violence at the National Festival Against Violence towards Children, La Dalia, 2011

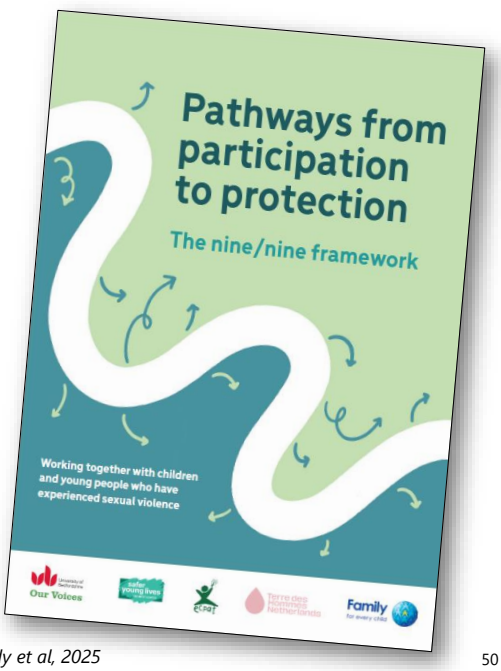
49

"Pathways from participation to protection"

Working with young people with experience of sexual violence in the UK, Cody et al have developed **"The nine/nine framework".**

This links the UN Committee's nine basic requirements for effective participation with nine **"protective pathways"** than can be afforded by participation in decision-making:

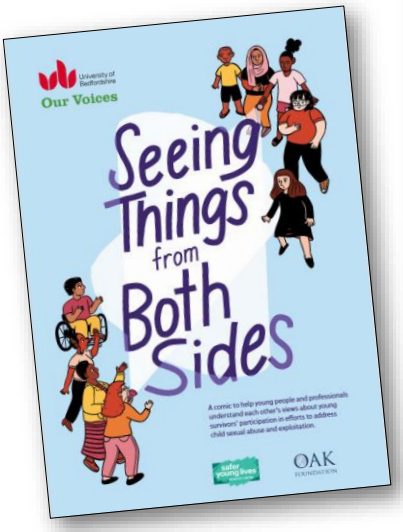
1. **Confidence in themselves;**
2. **Capacities;**
3. **Choice and control;**
4. **Critical consciousness;**
5. **Confidence in the care being given** (building trust between professionals and young people);
6. **Credibility;**
7. **Creativity;**
8. **Promoting commitments** (strengthening accountability);
9. **Challenging the culture of silence.**



Cody et al, 2025

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Seeing Things from Both Sides





(Cody and Soares, 2023)

From the same team, working with young people with experience of sexual violence in the UK, comes this comic, designed to explore different perspectives on participation and protection in a way that encourages young people themselves to engage in this discussion.

There has been extensive research on the integration of protection and participation, but at the root of it is the fundamental principle of indivisible and inalienable human rights:

ARTICLE 12

"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".

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- Nor can we **put children at risk** in order to hear their voices.
- **It is our responsibility to uphold both rights.**



IMPORTANT NOTICE: In all these examples of children and young people taking an active part in safeguarding, whether through participatory research, participation in decision-making, peer education, advocacy or campaigning, it is important to emphasise that, while children and young people, as citizens and rights-holders, **can voluntarily choose to participate in these activities** and contribute to safeguarding, **they can never be held responsible.** The ultimate responsibility and accountability for children's safety **always remains with the responsible adults**.

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4. Vulnerable or resilient?

What does "vulnerable" mean?

- ~~Disadvantaged?~~
- ~~Weak?~~
- ~~At risk?~~

"To be vulnerable means to be exposed to the possibility of harm while substantially lacking ability and/or means to protect oneself."
(Schroeder and Gefenas, 2009)

Exposed to possibility of harm

Lacking ability/means to protect oneself

What does "resilient" mean?

To be resilient means to have the capacity to adapt and thus overcome the damaging effects of adversity
(Fenwick-Smith et al, 2018)

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When the children and young people that CESESMA works with are identified as ***disadvantaged, marginalised*** or ***at risk***, it is easy to assume – without evidence – that the second part of the definition of vulnerable must also apply; i.e. that **because they face adversity or disadvantage, they have no capacity to protect themselves…**

… and so to label them as ***"vulnerable"***…

… thus conveniently ignoring the possibility that they **do** have this capacity, and are therefore not vulnerable but ***resilient***.



Children and young people
We want to live without violence

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Labelling any group as vulnerable in this way loses sight of the factors which may make individuals within the group either **more vulnerable** or **more resilient** that others, and so paves the way for the misguided assumption that all the members of this group are incapable and/or lacking agency.

Researchers are under pressure to avoid researching with so-called "vulnerable groups".

- University ethical review frameworks often directly or indirectly steer researchers away from research with so-called vulnerable groups. *(Taplin et al, 2021)*
- Ethical guidance typically insists on the importance of child protection while ignoring the child's right to speak and be heard (*Robinson, 2024*), thus letting the ethicality of silencing children in situations of vulnerability go unquestioned.
- "Vulnerability" is confused with lack of competence. *(Carter, 2009)*
- Labelling entire groups as "vulnerable" leads to unnecessary blanket protections and restricted opportunities. *(Bracken-Roche et al, 2017)*





So that:

"A growing body of literature argues that well-intentioned gatekeepers may be further marginalising vulnerable populations, by denying them the opportunity to make an informed choice or receive benefits associated with research participation, perpetuating power imbalances and keeping members of those populations hidden and further excluded from participation."

(Powell et al, 2020, p. 327)

"This may mean that worthwhile projects with children are never realized and children are denied their participatory rights and voices remain unheard."

(Coyne, 2010, p. 452),

Leading to: "The least sensitive, and possibly least useful, research being designed, funded, reviewed and conducted on the least vulnerable children."

(Carter, 2009, p 862).

In the NGO/civil society sector, on the other hand, the opposite view is increasingly heard. Here it is widely understood that children living in marginal and precarious circumstances are those **we most need to engage** in research, advocacy and activism.

They are the ones who have the most to contribute, and who will benefit most from transformative participation initiatives.

(Garcia-Quiroga and Salvo Agoglia, 2020).

For adults to pick and choose those occasions when children will be listened to, and which children will be listened to – based on perceived vulnerability or any other grounds – is clearly a human rights violation.





CESESMA rejects the mis-labelling of all children facing disadvantage as "vulnerable".

CESESMA does not believe that the children's situation of marginalisation and disadvantage, and the risk and uncertainty in their lives, take away their capacity and agency.

Though some may be vulnerable, they all have **voice, agency** and the potential for **empowerment**, and many demonstrate exceptional **resilience**.

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This view is backed by research evidence:

- While excessive adversity in childhood is often associated with vulnerability, a certain degree of adversity leads to increased resilience. *(Seery et al, 2010)*
- A connection can be identified between adversity in early childhood and resilience in emerging adulthood. *(Luecken and Gress, 2009)*
- Considering children's resilience to disasters, "Important engines of resilience that can be mobilised and translated into protective and collective action include … problem-solving and ingenuity; motivation to overcome challenges; a sense of purpose, hope and supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and leadership at many levels." *(Masten, 2021).*
- Considering also the rural context in which CESESMA works, children and young people's resilience may be linked to forms of social capital found in rural communities, such as networks of trust and reciprocity, sense of community and stability and connection with the land, nature, agriculture and a sense of permanence in place. *(Cheshire et al, 2015; Scott, 2013; Paniagua, 2013).*



Isn't it time to stop mis-identifying entire groups of children and young people as "vulnerable", and to recognise instead the **capacity, agency** and **resilience** of children living in marginal and disadvantaged situations?

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Solidarity vs. stigma



What about the risk that children facing disadvantage or adversity may feel **stigmatised** if they choose to speak out?

- When a group of children and young people come together who face the same issues, stigmatising labels or messages will be rejected.

  Through their **solidarity** and sense of "all being in it together", they can see that their shared challenges are nothing to be ashamed of *(Farthing, 2012)*.

- Also, the empowering effect of **a rights-based approach** counters stigmatising messages.

  When children and young people experiencing disadvantage or adversity **come together in solidarity** and **learn about their rights**, they can see that their problems are not due to their personal inadequacy, but to structural socio-political problems that persist **because duty-bearers fail to uphold children's rights and are not held accountable** *(Lister, 2013)*.

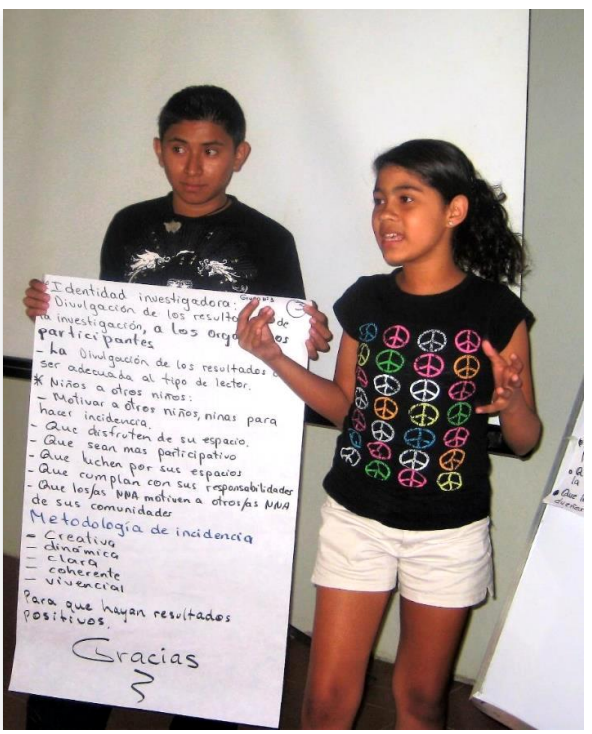
61

5. Silenced or empowered? CESESMA's model of empowerment.

"**Empowerment**" has become something of a buzzword and is seldom clearly defined.

- It is not the same as "***enabling***",
- … or "***capacity-building***",
- … or "***power-sharing***",

…though it may involve all of these.



Do you remember Shier's "Pathways to Participation"

Five levels of participation

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.

Working in the UK in the 1990s, I supported children acting as expert consultants to national arts and cultural institutions. I wanted to understand how adults interact with child citizens in these situations.

At the turn of the Millennium, my new model emerged…

Three stages of adult commitment at each level

Openings >

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

Opportunities >

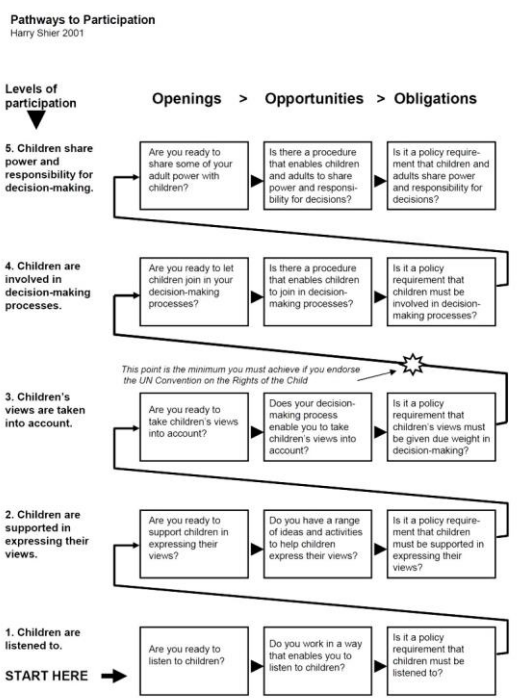
An opportunity occurs when you have the skills and resources to be able to work at this level

Obligations

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



Shier, H (2001). Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations. *Children & Society,* 15: 107-117



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Openings > Opportunities > Obligations

Levels of participation			
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.	Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?	Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?	Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.	Are you ready to let children join in your decision-making processes?	Is there a procedure that enables children to join in decision-making processes?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in decision-making processes?
This point is the minimum you must achieve if you endorse the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child			
3. Children's views are taken into account.	Are you ready to take children's views into account?	Does your decision-making process enable you to take children's views into account?	Is it a policy requirement that children's views must be given due weight in decision-making?
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.	Are you ready to support children in expressing their views?	Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views?
START HERE 1. Children are listened to.	Are you ready to listen to children?	Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?	Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

(Shier 2001)

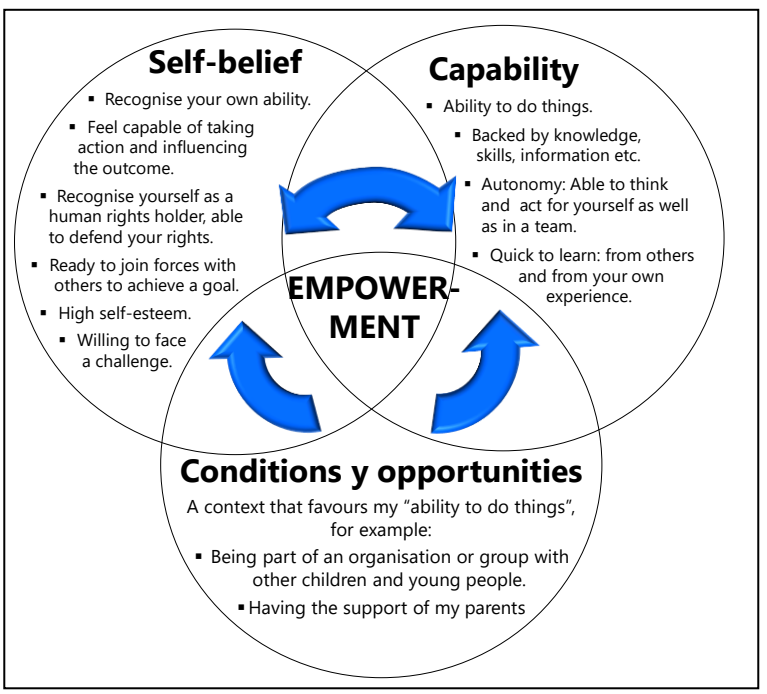
At level 5, Pathways to Participation focuses on **adults sharing power with children and young people.**

But it doesn't distinguish between **"Power-sharing"** and **"empowerment".**

For this we need to look at **CESESMA's model of Empowerment ...**



(This model first appeared in Spanish, CESESMA-UNN, 2010. English version in Shier, 2019).



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Re-thinking the adult role



Self esteem, self belief, self-confidence, respect for diversity, will and drive to make a difference, sense of solidarity, commitment to teamwork ….

These things grow within a person; I can't give them to you.

What kinds of processes can I facilitate that might help them grow?

We can help with knowledge and skills.

We can help establish conditions and create opportunities.

Key points about this model of empowerment



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1. ***Empowerment is not the same as "power-sharing"***
   - Empowerment does not mean those with greater power sharing some of that power with those who have less.
   - While it is true that adults can choose to share power with children and young people in this way, it is also true that what they give, they can just as easily take back.
   - Rather, empowerment is a transformation that takes place within the children and young people themselves – a transformation that belongs to them and that no one can take away.

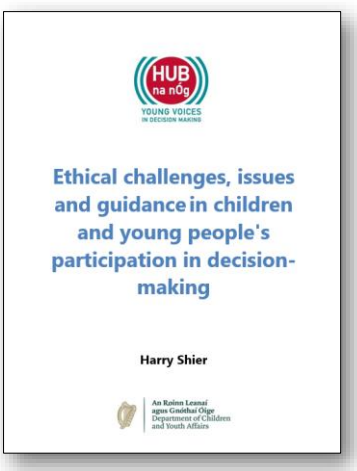


2. No-one "empowers" anyone

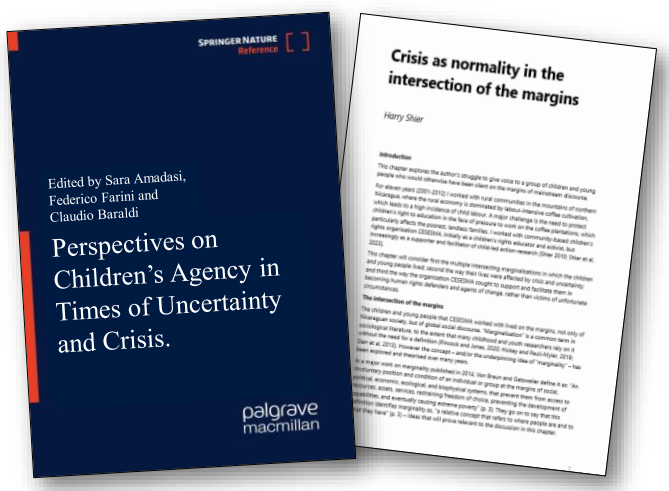
- Therefore, adults do not "empower" children and young people; the children themselves become empowered.
- Empowerment is neither a gift nor something that is taught; rather, it is a transformation that takes place within the individual.
- Although adults cannot "empower" children and young people, they can foster and facilitate educational processes through which children and adolescents can empower themselves.

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Final note: There will be a PDF handout version available with the full list of references. However, this presentation has drawn heavily on two pieces of work in progress to be published next year:



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All works by Shier or CESESMA are available at **www.harryshier.net**

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