

PARTICIPATION, RIGHTS AND CHILDREN IN CARE IN CHINA

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Introduction

The participation of children who are separated from their families, in making decisions on matters that affect them, has become recognised as an issue of major importance around the world, not least for children's protection and personal development. But children's participation cannot be considered as a series of activities isolated from other aspects of their lives. Children's participation is a vital component of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which itself, in turn, is of crucial importance as a framework for children separated from their families, who are generally living in circumstances where they are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. This paper looks at some participation examples and issues for children in care (that is in residential and foster care), but in the context of separation from family, protection and rights. That is, first, children in care as part of a larger group of children who are separated from their families for a variety of reasons, such as abuse, trafficking, abandonment, and so on. Second, the broader perspective of social protection emerging from the development of child rights programming – that is, the development of services and initiatives for children based on analysis of their circumstances and rights.

Background

Children's participation has taken on increasing importance over the past decade, for two main, inter-linked reasons. First, the ratification of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by every country in the world (except two) [1]. This widespread ratification gives official recognition, almost globally, that children have a right to participate – that is, rights to information, to be consulted and to participation in decision making on matters that concern them. Second, at the same time as the CRC was compiled, theoretical advances also acknowledged the importance of participation and changing perceptions of children and childhood. In particular, the development of a 'new' sociological paradigm of childhood, which recognised diversity and difference in childhood, but most importantly that children are 'social actors', who can and do participate in and influence the world around them from birth (see James and Prout 1990, also James, Jenks and Prout 1998, Corsaro 1997, Jenks 1996). The obligation to report on the CRC to the United Nations Committee, the making of National Plans of Action, and new paradigms and perceptions of childhood, have all promoted the notion and practice of children's participation around the world. State governments, local governments, national and local organisations, community groups and agencies, have looked to how and where children can participate in social decision making [2]. Governments have included children's participation in new legislation, but processes and methods for the implementation of participation have not always followed quickly behind enactment of law. Alongside an increase in participation work, there has been increasing

concern over the quality of participation initiatives for children, and the need to ensure such participation is meaningful [3].

The circumstances of many children in care [4] around the world have provoked other important reasons for the development of children's participation, linked also to rights (see West 2003 a and 2003 b). Child protection, that is, activities including the prevention of separation from family, safety within families and outside families, has been especially significant for children in care. The better realisation of rights for children who are in care involves their participation. But also, on a pragmatic basis, there has been an increasing recognition of the greater efficiency and efficacy of services where their users are involved in decision making. That is, care for children, including welfare homes and foster care, works better when children are participating in various ways in welfare home and foster care life, and especially when they are involved in decisions about their care. It is the situation of children in care that has provided a wide range of issues, problems and circumstances that have demanded children's participation, in addition to residential and foster care being the location for numerous initiatives and innovatory work on children's participation.

The reasons for participation activities for children living in care being so exemplary are perhaps not hard to find. Many cultures and societies, and the CRC, suggest that the best place for children to live and grow is in their family. Children in care are generally separated from their birth family (see below). In many cultures such separated children, especially those living in residential care (welfare homes) are socially 'out of place' – which is one reason why foster care, that is care for children in a family, has been given such prominence in recent years, for example in western Europe. Thus, work with children in care means working with children 'out of place', that is children who are vulnerable to living out of the norms and conventions of social life. This work is often harder to accomplish because of the circumstances and experiences of the children, but such work 'on the margins' sheds light on the possibility of work with children living in the norm, the centre, or conventional core of social life.

Institutionalisation and alternatives

Apart from the social emphasis on family care, there has also been increasing realisation that many residential care institutions are not acceptable places for children to live. It is suggested that 'hardly anyone today denies that institutions are unable to attend to physical and cognitive needs and the needs for social and emotional stimulation in any way comparable to what can be achieved in a setting which is open to life within society. The concept of deprivation is used constantly in specialised studies describing the consequences of life in institutions to indicate the lack of affective and personal care suffered by institutionalised children' (Crotti 2003, p vii).

Opposition to children having to live in large institutionalised homes has increased for several reasons, including issues of lesser quality of care and especially mounting evidence that many such places are sites of physical and sexual abuse of children. There has often been a failure of children's rights to be realised (for example, to social inclusion, to education), and broader issues and problems of the institutionalisation of children. Lifelong problems have been found to derive from institutionalisation – that is, early life where children learn to cope only or best in a regime or social environment that regiments their life. In such institutions, 'these children are submitted to collective routines and are unable to make use of sufficient spaces to allow the unique personality of each individual to be expressed, developed and tapped to the full' (ibid). There has been an over- representation of children from residential care in other forms of institution, such as in prison and the armed forces in their later

life. Institutionalisation has manifest itself in children's difficulties in making an adjustment to family life later on (relationships of their own), and problems in leaving care and living independently.

The problems experienced by children in institutions have not only required better recognition of children's rights, and especially instigation of child protection mechanisms, but also development of children's participation. Children's participation in care can take many forms, but essentially needs the creation and maintenance of 'child-friendly environments'. That is, places where children feel safe and comfortable and can speak out freely about their concerns, where children's rights are recognised, and where children are, as a matter of course, involved in all decisions made about their lives. Alternatives to institutionalisation have included the development of small group, family style homes (see, for example, Wright 1999 on China), and the promotion of adoption and fostering.

As an alternative to residential care and problems of institutional life, foster care has been much promoted. But foster care has also been identified as a potential site of abuse for children, and concerns have been raised about the need for the establishment and enforcement of standards of care. A reason for foster care being more dangerous than has been popularly realised is because of a lack of recognition of the extent of abuse and neglect that happens in 'natural' families, and that parenting skills are not biologically inherent in all adults. Thus, although families in general are perceived as the best place for children to live, not all families are locations of safety, protection or provide an environment for children to develop (or even survive). One of the many reasons children have a need to enter care is because of abusive families: children may run away to street life because of their family or school situation, be vulnerable to trafficking, or simply be desperate to get away because of abuse or other pressures. In some countries legislation has been enacted and services developed to enable children to be removed from their families because of abuse or neglect. But even in these countries there have been cases of horrifying mistreatment and deaths of children when abuse may not have been observed by outsiders or services, and sometimes when the opportunity to remove a child not been taken. [5] The development of national and community based child protection services is an essential component in steps towards the realisation of children's rights and goes hand-in-hand with children's participation.

The participation of children in care may thus seem to be a discussion of children's participation in limited circumstances, and of a comparatively small group. But any consideration of where these children are living, where they have come from and why they are there, in fact opens up debate about the roles and duties of communities and families in providing care for children, child-friendly environments, and in working to realise the rights of children. The general shift away from institutional care towards a community basis of care, has provided additional sites and opportunities for children's participation. Residential care, such as welfare homes, itself offers opportunities for participation of children in running the home. Foster care indicates the need for community based participation, which can also be linked to welfare homes and to other forms of participation for children, such as in local schools. In addition, the rehabilitation needs of disabled children living in foster care, may mean that community support centres are required, and these provide significant opportunities for developing and facilitating children's participation, including their involvement in local services and the use of such centres as sites for clubs for children, and bases for lifeskills education, in addition to providing support for parents and parenting skills, including, for example, care for disabled children.

Reasons why children come into care may show some resemblances in countries around the world, but different cultures and societies may offer different perspectives. In Western Europe, children are taken into state care as a means of ensuring their protection because, for example, their families cannot cope with them. Such removal from family places at least a moral obligation (especially in the light of revelations of the extent of abuse in institutions and homes over the past thirty years), to ensure that the homes where children are placed to live in care are safe. In other countries and regions, children may go into care because of discrimination on grounds of gender or disability, or because children have been trafficked, or have run away, been sold or abandoned.

Until recently in China, 'children in care' has tended to refer to orphaned and abandoned children often taken into welfare homes at an early age. Changing economic and social conditions, and changing views on children's rights and care, have brought a broader perspective, in looking to community based alternatives for children's care, but also, and importantly, recognising the wider overall profile of children in need of such care. Residential care in China in recent years has been generally associated with disabled children and girls, and with boys (and now more girls) orphaned in their teens or adolescence. But there are many other children who are separated from their parents and also in need of care. These especially include increasing numbers of street children who cannot return home (because of abuse, or because their homes cannot be found), and children whose parents are in prison. Street Children Protection Centres in China, run by government, provide temporary accommodation but increasing numbers of children need longer term alternative care. A new, and major issue and group in need of alternative care are children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. The experience of other countries demonstrates how fast this group increases in size, and the problems of stigma and discrimination faced by the children. Problems of discrimination and exclusion are experienced by many children separated from family in many countries, for many reasons, because of the nature of their work, because they are disabled, because they or their parents are living with HIV/AIDS. The circumstances of children living with and orphaned by HIV/AIDS provides a set of new challenges for the development of children's care, for their protection and their participation, that will probably set new standards for a range of future work.

In looking at a broader continuum of why and how children come into care, or become separated from family, then more possible sites for children's participation can be identified. For example, in community initiatives to combat trafficking, in lifeskills development, in child- to- child education, in services for prevention of abuse, in programmes to combat bullying, and so on. All of these might come under the umbrella of social protection, that is local or community based initiatives to protect children from exploitation and abuse, but which are also about making communities and families safer places for children to live in. Children know more about their lives and situation than anyone else, and so their participation in terms of their views and influence on decision making for effective and appropriate protection services is crucial.

Thus, awareness of the nature of care, who lives in care, and which children are vulnerable to needing care, are fundamental to the development of children's participation. It is part of a process of identifying points at which children's participation is essential to the development of effective care and welfare services, and where children's own associations, and so on, can contribute to their protection. It demonstrates the need to look at the diversity of children's circumstances, which in turn suggests some of the places and opportunities, and the need for the participation of children who come under the overall umbrella of 'children in care' or 'children in need of care'. The phrase 'orphans and vulnerable children' (OVC) is currently fashionable as a general category, but we are also considering

effective responses to their situation and so, really discussing children's participation in child protection, and in other areas of rights.

Other rights often also fall into the category of participation. For example, take the rights of disabled children to education – this cannot be seen in isolation, for example in being somehow achieved through a teacher visiting and working in a welfare home. Education is an important right for all children, disabled children no less. Disabled children, along with other children, also have rights to inclusion. The concept of participation is clearly associated with inclusion, that is in being part of society, being able to 'take part'. This is why, for disabled children living in a welfare home (or living in foster care or anywhere, including with their own families), rights to education might also be said to be about rights to 'integrated education': that is the inclusion of disabled children in education provision, such as ordinary schools, used by non-disabled children.

These issues of disabled children's rights to education and inclusion, provide an example of how rights to participation are linked to other rights. The link is regarded as so significant that in November 2002 a group of children in India declared that 'Children's participation is the most important principle and element in CRC that cuts across all other rights, namely: the right to development, survival and protection' (SATFCP 2002). Other arenas and issues for the participation of disabled children are very important when looking at the participation of children in care in China, since the majority of the 54, 550 orphaned and abandoned children care in or through institutions in China are disabled (MCA Stockholm 2003).

Child Rights and Programming

It is because the rights of children are not separate strands but integrated, that the concept of 'child rights programming' was developed and increasingly utilised at the turn of the century. As part of social development and the delivery of welfare and other services, children's rights and the achievement of these rights need to be looked at overall. That is, the circumstances of children should be analysed for breaches, denial of and unfulfilled rights, and how these may be overcome. Those adults (and children) who have responsibilities for ensuring and implementing particular rights (who are known as 'duty bearers') need to be identified. This process is not an abstract, dry or irrelevant exercise, but a means of looking to children's welfare, protection, development and participation. Just as such analysis should look to all rights issues for particular groups and communities of children, so too the circumstances and lives of individual children need to be approached holistically. An holistic approach looks to how particular problems and circumstances of an individual child impinge on other parts of their lives, and so cannot be treated in isolation.

Taking up the elements of a child rights programming approach would require us not to simply look at children who are currently in care in China and their circumstances, for example the standard of care in welfare homes and in foster care, and the realisation of rights for those children. Care is about providing alternatives to birth family for particular children for some particular reason, and a range of children may in fact be in such need of alternative care to live with their own family, as noted above in cases of street children. Defining services as only for certain children, and/ or for certain circumstances, denies the essential benefits of using holistic approaches to rights and to individual children. If services are to be responsive to children's rights and so take up holistic approaches, they need to at least consider and aim to be potentially responsive to *all* children. That is, in this case, to look to holistic protection approaches. This means that services providing care for separated children

looking at means of approaching diverse groups of children, who have different experiences and circumstances – from groups such as disabled babies, girls of different ages, street children, trafficked children, abandoned children, to the more specific such as a particular disabled teenage street girls and so on. These issues of diversity and difference are part of the problems of inclusion and non-discrimination for children that are principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in addition to their being elements of the theoretical underpinning of the sociology of childhood. The guiding principle of the CRC, and child rights programming, is to consider what is the best interests of the child.

So, taking the broader perspective and including the concept of the best interests of the child, for example, would consider where is the best place for children, not just children overall, but individual children. If the best place is to live with their family, then some consideration needs to be given to processes of preventing the separation of children from families, for example, through abandonment or trafficking. There would also need some thought given to the reintegration of separated children into their own families (for example, street children, trafficked children, and so on). Such a perspective would also need to consider whether their family is the best place for children – can parent(s) and family cope with children, are there problems of abuse, exploitation and so on: does alternative care need to be found in the best interests of the child? What sort of alternative care is best? – here is one main entry point for the participation of children in care in matters that affect them – their involvement in decisions on where they should live. But all of these broader child protection initiatives are also sites for children's participation.

Participation

Before looking further at opportunities and activities for children's participation in care, some consideration needs also to be given to the meaning of the term 'participation' [6]. In most languages, including English, a precise, uncontested definition is difficult to achieve. From the early 1990s (and before) many authors have attempted to categorise different forms of participation. At one end of these continuums, they have most importantly identified issues and examples of manipulation and tokenism, where children's participation is essentially a show done for the benefit of adults. Discussion of various forms of participation is of interest and importance to the commonly agreed need to seek meaningful participation – not only if rights are to be realised but also because of benefits gained from children's participation. Thus, by children's participation, we mean children's consultation, children's views and perspectives being heard and being taken into account, and children's involvement in decision making. Why is this so often found to be difficult? The reason in general lies with adults and the constructions of childhood that do not recognise children's competence, capabilities, and fail to take up issues of diversity and difference in childhood. The key lies in seeing children's participation not as a blanket and ill defined term, but in considering it as praxis – that is, as methods and practice in particular circumstances and contexts, activities about consultation and decision making which take into account the situation in question. Participation needs to be applied in order to make sense, rather than discussed in abstract. Papers and discussions such as this, are no substitute for real engagement with children and the learning and benefits that occur for both children and adults in any participation activity.

Children's participation can take place in different ways, forms and places, depending on age and circumstances. Although children are not seen as capable of participation by some adults, many are demonstrably participating in everyday life. By the term 'children' some people (adults) often think of very young children, even babies, whereas, quite apart from the international definition of children as

human beings up to the age of 18 years, children are often taking on enormous responsibilities. For example, many children are working full time, and making decisions every day, and some have responsibilities for other children and adults, for example in acting as their carers. In accepting participation as a right, but also recognising children's various capabilities and experiences (for example in survival in difficult circumstances, such as life on the street), then the opportunities for participation are opened up and can be considered further.

Given a broader perspective on children in care, the various circumstances of vulnerable children, and the opportunities presented in holistic approaches, including child rights programming, then the possible locations for children's participation are varied and enormous. They range from children's participation in the prevention of separation from families, participation in their temporary and permanent accommodation arrangements, participation in reintegration into families, to participation in decision making in their communities and social life. Only a few of these areas can be considered here. Participation might be considered in two basic forms, of individuals and groups. Individual children can participate in decisions about their personal lives, can be consulted and can participate in groups or associations. Much participation work has concerned children in groups, making joint decisions, being consulted, reaching a consensus. Children have an understanding and perception of their circumstances, and rights to have these taken into account. Their views can easily be ascertained through discussion or consultation with them. For example, finding out children's perceptions has been found to be a useful means to improve and develop services for children, rather than having adults making judgements on their lives and needs from the outside. We might begin here with children's individual lives and the related question or principle of best interests of the child.

Standards for placement

For children in care, their involvement in decision making on matters that concern them clearly entails their participation in the process of decisions on where they are placed in care. Once children are not in the care of their families, for whatever reason (be they abandoned, street children, trafficked children etc) the burden of responsibility of care and for realisation of their rights immediately changes. Despite the debate on residential care vs foster care [7], children have rights to information, can make decisions and some prefer residential care (that is, living in groups) while others prefer foster care. This decision cannot be taken in abstract, but depends on what opportunities are available (including choice of family for foster care – to at least ensure that the child to be placed will settle in and get on with members of their new family). There is a duty to ensure appropriate provision and the best interests of children – which means also taking children's views into consideration. Thus, children should be involved in decision making regarding their placement in care, and this is a basic and important area of participation for children in care.

The question of placement, and the importance of children's involvement in decisions on where to live, opens up other issues of decision making and possibilities for participation. For example, the regulation of everyday life and children's licence for personal decision making in residential care has been identified as an issue in the problems of institutionalisation. How much choice can children exercise over food? Not only because of food allergies, but also taking into account the degree of choice exercised by children in ordinary life in families. Questions of social and cultural context might be raised here, in terms of expectations of behaviour and treatment of children, but given the accepted baseline of the CRC, the for children in care there are standards to be aspired to in all forms of residential and foster care. The local situation may accord children little participation in family decision

making, but the CRC provides children with the right to participation in all matters that concern them, and so implicitly posits at least some degree of children's participation and influence in family decisions. It is the degree of such family participation that is most difficult to often discuss, and it is most often drawn to the attention of the local community in cases of abuse and neglect – which is where children are clearly not participating in the sense of making decisions and being consulted on what is happening.

There are other issues in relation to living standards and problems of context. For example in what sort of choices can be afforded by institutions. However, again the question needs to be broadened, because it does not concern only the institution but its place in the local community and in the state, and the responsibility of duty bearers for the welfare and rights of children in care. Such standards are also an issue in foster care, for example in seeking to ensure children's participation within the family. The question of a certain standard of living needs also to be addressed, in seeking how to ensure poorer families are not discriminated against when applying to be foster parents. These are difficult issues, and open broader social questions, but a baseline exists in the state's commitment to children's rights, and therefore the requirement to take action in the best interests of the child. There are problems of balance, in providing a standard of living that matches the national average but also takes account of local circumstances. Such issues become subject to much wider debate, because of the problem that expectations should not be raised in case children in care are perceived by families as better off, so that more families abandon children (as has been found to happen in other countries). Tensions are thus inherent in ensuring that standards are not only set against the best available in the local context, but take account of national living and resources.

The discussion of living standards is not removed from children's participation, in focussing on the importance of adult responsibilities, since they are duty bearers. Adults are important in the initial facilitation of children's participation in many settings. The context is crucial in developing forms and methods of participation. There are principles that children should be involved, and children can participate in such discussions and debate on standards, and will have views and are usually very realistic about what is available. The topics for decision making will be set by the local context.

Another aspect of a local context are the settings in which children's participation can take place. Children's right to decision making not only concerns their individual lives, but also their social and physical environments. Welfare homes are sites where children usually outnumber the staff, and provide significant opportunities for children's participation, for example in the life and organisation of the home. The increasing use of community based alternatives offer additional scope for children's participation. Some welfare homes are converted into small group homes, with several children living in units run by houseparents, and children's participation might involve not only life in the family but also cut across the organisation of several units. All types of residential care services are located in, and should be part of a local community. Children's participation initiatives in the community can increase the social inclusion of children living in residential and foster care. Here is an opportunity for the participation of children in care to be innovative and exemplary. The increasing community based nature of care for separated children, and the need to ensure their inclusion and participation, means that initiatives focussed on children in care may also be replicated and used in other communities.

Children, councils, consultation

In contrast to ensuring participation within families, children's participation in groups, such as in residential care, and in local community life, is better known and developed. Around the world,

examples abound of initiatives to develop children's participation in institutions such as schools and the wider community. Such forms of children's participation have become accepted to the extent that the debate in many countries is not whether it should be done, but how meaningful participation in these settings is best achieved. Here, the point and right of children's participation has been accepted, and the necessity of starting and developing practice, and then reflecting on what has been done with a view to improvement, is just the beginning.

In some respects, for children in care, participation for those living in welfare homes (or street children centres) should offer easier and immediate opportunities than for those living in other circumstances. The welfare home should be looking to children's participation as priority. But there is often a problem in adult acceptance of such participation and adults changing their practice and developing new methods of work, in creating a conducive environment and culture for children's participation. But adults do tend to understand opportunities in institutions and have numerous models for participation in institutions from their own working and other experiences, such as committees and councils of elected representatives to fora that include all children.

Adults tend to reproduce forms of participation and decision making with which they are familiar, and so look to training children for replicating adult styles and roles. Thus, forms of participation such as children's and young people's councils have been much discussed in literature and practice (by adults) in many countries. Much of this discussion has focused on current issues including seeking methods for improvement of implementation of children's participation and issues of representation.

Representative type forms of children's participation have included school councils, with representatives from each class, and then such councils sending representatives on to community councils and regional councils. In Nepal, a network of children's clubs fulfils a similar function. There are examples where a local city children's council has had representatives from schools and from clubs and other neighbourhood fora. Such systems could easily be adapted by welfare homes. The issues for representative systems have focused on the inclusion of the voices of all children. Councils and fora can be dominated by the most articulate children, or those who are better off, or those who are non-disabled, and so on. The diversity and issues of difference in childhood needs to be reflected by a plurality of forms of participation, for example in councils, with a range of organisations sending representatives. But primarily methods are needed to ensure diversity, that all children are consulted, and their views made known and taken into account.

Thus, a further question has been raised on how to develop alternative forms of participation that definitely include all children and do not depend on vagaries of representative systems. Here the practice of research has begun to offer a range of opportunities and possibilities for consulting children that go beyond the outcomes of research itself. The methods of research and especially children's own research, can be adapted to methods of consultation with children. Networks of children created through research type methods offer opportunities for participation of children living in various forms of state care, from welfare homes to foster care. The possibilities of children's own research might be linked also to children's own clubs or other associations, which have proved extraordinarily useful in development of quality of care for children in residential and foster care, in addition to the benefits to the children in the club.

Research

Research has often been seen as the prerogative of trained scientists in academic institutions. Yet for our purposes, it means essentially finding out the views of a particular group of people. The processes of research are where the 'science' lies, in the interpretation of results and achieving a result that represents the views of the participants. What often comes as a shock to many adults, is children's ability to participate not only in the development of research questions and methods, and undertaking research (that is asking questions, observing, recording and so on) but also their high levels of standards and ethics. For example, in wanting to achieve a result that is representative of the views and ideas of their peers, rather than confirming their personal perceptions and preoccupations.

Research by children in care has become increasingly recognised as significant and as accomplished as that done by adults [8]. Workshops with children from care in China have not only revealed how much children know and can relate about their circumstances (such as how welfare homes are organised and managed), but also their competence in conducting research [9]. The use of research methods in participation work with children should not be seen as another means of providing reports and findings but also as a means of consulting and engaging children, soliciting their views, and so as a method of participation with more general application.

What emerges in the process of facilitating children's own research is not simply a means of finding out children's views but also a means of revealing children's competences and capabilities. Children's research has competently paralleled research by academics, for example where the findings from research done by ten children in England (see West 1995) achieved results comparable with a university research unit that had been commissioned by government. But the children's research had some additional insights.

Associations of Children

One form of children's participation that is increasing in many parts of the world is that of children's own associations, be they clubs or unions. That is, associations often established by, but certainly organised and administered by children themselves. These are particularly well known in South Asia, South America and Africa, where children working and living on the street have formed groups. But especially for children in residential and foster care, children's associations have played an important role in what are seen as 'developed' countries. In Scotland the development of an association for children in and from care, run by children and young people in and from care, has been especially important in developing the quality of life and opportunity for children in and from care. These networks can be especially important for children who have left care, and who have no real family links to take up.

Children in other countries have established associations, for example in Europe (Crimmens and West 2003). Some such association might be initially facilitated by adults, for example, as self-help groups, or come into being through children's own research groups. They may take up particular issues, such as the environment, and take action on their decisions.

Starting out

A strong theme emerging in all discussions and from examples of children's participation, is the importance of starting work and of experimentation. One of the best ways for adults to learn about

children's participation and the issues involved, is experiential training. There are sets of principles for participation that must be discussed and then adhered to, for example, the limits of children's decision making, but also the commitment to children making decisions themselves without adult interference.

Children's participation is a process as much as product. That is, it is not the outcome of a council or forum, but the processes of consultations, seeking views, and making decisions, that is important. The context provides some boundaries or limitations on what is possible, but must not be seen as preventing children's participation. Experience in many countries has shown that children can participate in far more areas of work, community and social life, than adults initially realise. The importance of getting started, and reflecting on processes and outcomes, cannot be over-emphasised.

Conclusion

These few examples of opportunities and places for participation of children in care do not comprise the whole range of possibilities. Different circumstances require different methods and approaches. In developing modern forms of participation, an essential element is the background and context of children's rights, which means children's involvement in their current situation, translates into children's decision making on their circumstances (for example their placement), and thus also on children's participation in developing views as a group. Children do not have pre-formed or fixed ideas: they also are involved in discussions to achieve consensus, and their views can be of enormous benefit to institutions, families, services and communities in which they live.

The development of participation for children in care offers significant benefits to adults, for example, in making their working lives easier (as discussed by adults who run Centres for Street Children, and who tried participatory ways of working). It also involves the increased inclusion of children in society which in itself is perceived to bring future benefits in contributing to social solidarity and community life and awareness. Children active now means adults who are more socially active and responsible in the future, having practised looking to the best interests of their community. The question becomes not about children's participation but in what sort of society do we wish to live? Most societies including China have indicated that the involvement of all citizens in building the future is essential to well-being. The participation of children in care is but a small beginning, but one that offers enormous potential.

Notes

1. The two exceptions are the United States of America and Somalia (the latter not having a recognised government).
2. There is a burgeoning literature on children's participation in many languages, particularly English, not all of which can be cited here. The number of publications in Chinese is growing steadily: see, for example, the forthcoming volume drawn from the international seminar hosted by the All China Women's Federation in October 2002. Hart's 1997 book has also been translated.
3. The problem of the rapid expansion of children's participation activities and the need to ensure quality of work has led to the recent development of a set of standards by the Child Participation Working Group of the Save the Children Alliance.

4. The term 'children in care' is here used as a shorthand for children who come into the care of the state, usually a local government, and who usually live in residential or foster. In the UK, the English term 'looked after' children is officially preferred, in the sense of children who are looked after by the state or local government. See also Tolfree 1995.
5. The development of child protection systems can be complex, given the issue of removal of children from family. In some countries sexual and physical abuse is against the law, but there are no mechanisms that are active for the implementation of law, nor services to provide support for children staying with their family, or alternative care for those who need to leave their family for protection.
6. There is not space to discuss the meaning and potential extent of children's participation in this paper – see the forthcoming book in Chinese and English on the proceedings from the international workshop on children's participation seminar held at the end of 2002 by the All China Women's Federation and Save the Children.
7. This formula of residential vs foster care is simplified here, representing the debate that took residential care to be largely institutionalised..
8. For examples of research done by children in care see Hazekamp in Crimmens and West 2003, West 1995, 1998, 1999).
9. An article on research by children in care is published in China Social Welfare (West 2003)

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