

CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

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In today's society there is a strong move towards canvassing the views of all stakeholders, yet the views of children and young people are still not being sufficiently heard. This is especially relevant to the developing world, where children are forced to take on adult roles much younger than their counterparts in the developed world. From working, caring for family members, even heading households - children are participating fully in adult activities. We know this is not by choice, but this does not mean that they should be ignored, these children should be given the opportunity to contribute to the development and direction of society.

Research with children is important to reach out to a section of society disadvantaged by age in terms of their representation in societal issues. The traditional method of conducting research with children is to use adult researchers who adapt their mode of communication to suit the children as much as possible. The innovative way is to train young people to conduct the research, involving children in the research process as collaborators, not merely using them in data collection by assigning them roles as passive subjects of research.

BACKGROUND

This new approach to research with children came to the fore as theories about children and childhood evolved from the traditional assumptions that viewed children as naturally passive, otherwise immature and hence incompetent persons who required training as they developed into adults. Policy and legal processes such as those defined by Tanzanian legal bodies and international conventions on children have also influenced the ideas people have about children. Experience in working with children has revolutionised these conceptions to the recognition that the child is a social actor, inhabiting a special social category that is in essence their own - they maintain a specific sub-culture. When children are given the right environment, they are informative and knowing beings about conditions affecting them and their social environment, therefore children can be valuable research experts on matters affecting them.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), ratified by Tanzania, obligates all states to commit themselves to the realisation of children's rights. In addition, Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) declares that states and other 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. Research with children is influenced by this philosophy.

WHY INVOLVE CHILDREN IN RESEARCH?

Involving children in research has the following advantages:

- It improves the quality and relevance of the research, since it becomes easier to enter the child's world (easier to gain rapport; less threatening, use of same language style) and

therefore obtain a more realistic picture of their environment. When an adult asks a child a question they will be given an answer that is probably true, but not as accurate if that child was answering the question to another child. Therefore, having a young person ask the question should ensure a more accurate answer, thus improving the quality of the research. There is also limited potential for an authority figure perhaps influencing the response.

- It improves children's participation in society, by minimising generalised assumptions, and giving them an opportunity to express themselves. Their role in society is acknowledged in an active and participatory manner.
- The process of participating in a research project can be a positive learning experience for children.
- It assists adult researchers to better understand issues affecting and confronting children.
- There is currently little information, as in findings from research, written for children.

In an ideal situation the children themselves would define the research topic; this would mean that the topic of research is one important to them. It would also result in the researchers being integrated with the interviewees as much as possible, certainly more deeply than an adult could be. Such research is a more complex undertaking, but can provide rich rewards.





KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN DOING RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

Ideally, children can be involved in any or all stages of the research process, i.e. from the defining and refining of the key research question to the dissemination of results. However, several key considerations need to be well thought through when planning for research with children. These are: ethical, research protocol, methodology, selection of data collection techniques, analysing the data, reporting, and dissemination of research results.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are the moral principles that ensure that the research is conducted in a manner that is sensitive to the situation of children, as well as appreciating the potential similarities and differences between doing research as adult researchers and doing research with children. As children may start out as unequal partners in the process, questioning the ownership and control of the research process and its ultimate benefits are crucial. In this regard, ethical considerations entail thinking how child researchers could be enabled to participate in, and not be exploited by, the research, as well as ensuring that their rights are protected.

Despite the understanding that children have legitimate roles in decisions about research participation, ethical conflicts may arise owing to cultural beliefs, and the reservations people may have on the 'modern' perspective on children's rights. For example, in Tanzania there is the legal tradition that parents/guardians are the primary decision makers for children in most Tanzanian contexts, and hence the aspect of consent may demand prior assent by the adult before a child may participate in research. The key ethical issues and the questions are:

- **Purpose of the Research**

Have children actively participated in defining the research problem? Is this problem a priority for them? Is the purpose of the research beneficial to children?

- **Impact on Children**

Will the research make a difference to children? What desirable outcomes could there be?

- **Effort Compared to Benefits**

Would the benefits to children from this research outweigh the effort and amount of time that children would have to commit to the research process?

- **Consent**

How to ensure that the children give proper and informed consent Are the children able to make their own judgement about their involvement?

- **Privacy and Confidentiality**

How to deal with issues of anonymity in delicate situations. Who is going to know the answers specific children give? Will their parents or person in authority be present?

- **Handling Sensitive Issues**

There should be an assessment of the sensitivity of the research environment to both the child researcher and child respondent. The research must be conducted in a manner that is sensitive to children in complex situations such as children with disabilities; children affected/infected with HIV/AIDS, known cases of abuse, orphaned children and the girl child, as well as children who are distressed or abused. Unexpected circumstances that arise during the course of the research, such as encountering a distressed child, may demand an immediate response to the child, and maybe a referral to appropriate services.

- **The Research Question**

Are the topic(s) and key questions easily understood by the child researchers and able to be asked directly to child respondents?

- **Understanding the Research Topic and Method**

Is the information presented in a way that children can understand?

- **Planning and Supporting the Process**

How will the children be involved? Is the timing convenient to them? Adult researchers need to provide support to child researchers throughout the process in terms of being available for supervision or just moral support; ensuring their safety, providing them with the appropriate rewards such as encouragement and praise, or simple gifts. Adult researchers may often be required to mediate between children researchers and respondents, especially in cases where community response towards them is questionable.

- **Funding of the Research Project**

Is the funding for this research sourced from an organisation that could potentially harm children - such as alcohol or cigarette producing companies ?

- **Dissemination**

How will children be involved in hearing the results? How will they be represented in the results?

RESEARCH PROTOCOL

A research protocol is a guide that provides clear descriptions of the purpose and therefore the steps to be taken in the course of the research process. A research protocol provides options on what to do in unexpected circumstances and is useful because it can be constant reminder to researchers on adhering to ethical issues. Some key aspects of a research protocol are:

- **Entering Point**

Selection of child researchers: recruiting the most appropriate child researchers requires one to be sensitive to the contexts that the research topic demands. What steps to follow in order to gain acceptance. Who to speak to in order to gain open access to the child. Possible entry points could be:



- Seeking contact through authorities – e.g. school administration, organisations, or Local Government Authority in their neighbourhood (the Village or Ward government authorities);
- Mobilising children through informal channels – word of mouth, children who may have some information on the research topic, or in community work; and
- Advertising through public presentations, meetings.

Sensible, cost-effective decisions appropriate to the Tanzanian context are important for recruitment. For example, it may be necessary to seek child researchers from the same research environment, e.g. same community, similar sex, or age range. The children should be interested in participating and should be able to commit their time without jeopardising other issues in their daily lives

- What issues a child is facing, or behaviour of a child would merit intervention by the lead (adult) researcher. When may you leave a situation as it is and when you should you try to intervene on behalf of the child, such as contacting responsible people or organisations.
- Strategising the ending - how should one leave the discussion with the child interviewee.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological considerations should reflect effective ways of children's participation and the richness in data relevant to the overall purpose. Participatory approaches are ideal in this regard because of the focus on ethical issues relevant to children's participation - such as: collaborative ownership and empowerment of research participants, and the approaches employ methods that children can handle best. Data from research using participatory approaches can be qualitative or quantitative, since they usually combine the use of methods traditionally divided into the qualitative arena, such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, with quantitative methods such as surveys and other techniques for measurements. Selection of the methodology should consider the following:

- **The Nature of Data**

Should it be qualitative, quantitative, or both? Why do we need such data?

- **The Process of Data Collection**

Who should do what in the data collection process? What are the advantages or disadvantages of using child interviewers instead of adult interviewers to interview children? The main differences in factors are the different manner of interaction with respondents in terms of research skills, language for communication and the power relationships that develop in adult/child versus child/child settings.

- **Training Needs of the Researchers**

What training will the children need, and what will the adults need? Generally child researchers need to understand the basics of doing research, and it is important to have them practice interviewing skills. Adult researchers need to be able to collaborate and communicate in a manner that is understandable and acceptable to children. For example, issues such as body language and the tone of the voice one uses in interviewing can reflect either domination or respect.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data collection methods must take into account how power relations and control of the research process interplay. Selecting methods that are sensitive to children's situations, for example building confidence among children researchers, using an easy to use data collection method, not using an overbearing manner, etc; that are also attractive so as to win the attention of the interviewee children, is important. Several methods are ideal in this regard, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, questionnaires, group discussions, and life histories.

Making these methods 'child-friendly' in practice is important, such as using child-friendly language, using 'ice-breakers' or methods that are interactive and responsive - such as games, to help child respondents overcome anxiety. The use of questionnaires can be too rigid since they are standardised, but can be more attractive if children practice using them with fellow children after a friendly preamble on the objective. The use of drawings and other visuals like pictures to attract children are better with the unstructured methods. Experiences of using the tape-recorder in many Tanzanian contexts has shown increasing acceptance, especially among children who enjoy listening to their responses when the tape is replayed.

ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING THE DATA

When children participate in analysing and interpretation of data, they will be able to point out some child specific anomalies that would otherwise be missed by adult analysts. Involving children in the interpretation of data makes the policy measures or recommendations for action that follow more relevant to children, and the results should be able to inform policy measures that are child friendly.

The initial steps in the analysis of data are normally sorting the data, data entry in statistical analysis, and coding of qualitative data. Coding refers to the process of putting data into categories, however children need not be involved at this stage, given their lack of skills in the analysis, especially using complex computer software for statistical analysis, or in qualitative data sorting. Sorting and analysis of qualitative data, which is often in the form of verbatim notes,

transcribed recordings of interviews or focus group discussions, jotted notes or chronological accounts of events/experiences, may also impose difficulties for children. This is because the identification of explanatory categories and linking them to develop an explanation and meaning of the information gathered requires experience and broader exposure than the social environment that children occupy. However, collaboration in data interpretation is feasible and desirable because at this stage, the opinion of all participants can be sought in order to make more meaningful conclusions. It is at this stage that children's voices should be reflected strongly in the research findings.

REPORTING AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Here one must consider the different stakeholders of the process, and their different social privileges, such as literacy levels and general exposure. Reporting therefore has to be done in a manner that makes the information accessible to each stakeholder. Four categories of audience for this type of research are:

- Reporting to the children who were interviewed and their carers. Also reporting to other children with an interest in the issues (e.g. students);
- Reporting to the funding bodies, academia and development partners;
- Reporting to authorities who are involved in issues of children's rights and providing social services to children, and
- Reporting to a wider audience in order to educate about children's rights.

CHALLENGES TO CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

Several challenges may need to be overcome in order to ensure a successful research project. These may include:

- **Social Acceptability**
Sometimes communities do not take children seriously, and may not be willing to cooperate with young researchers. It is thus necessary to seek permission, or to explain the

objective of conducting research to community authorities, parents or guardians.

- **Inadequate Skills**

In undertaking research a number of skills are required, for example developing research questions, proposal writing, data collection techniques, data analysis, and report writing. The children may not have these skills and may need training and facilitation.

- **Management of the Process**

Sometimes the motivation of child researchers can result in them consuming a lot of time collecting data, or alternatively they can be distracted or discouraged in the course of the research. To minimise this intervention by adult researchers and continuous consultations are necessary.

- **When Research Becomes Exploitation**

This is an ethical challenge but it captures the whole philosophy underpinning children's rights and participation in research, which can result in research that is not necessarily of benefit to them. Research becomes exploitation when:

- Child researchers are used as workers or tools for information collection, and are rewarded in a manner not commensurate to the efforts they have put in.
- The research is not for the children's benefit, and interferes with their normal pattern of life – such as schooling, or play.
- Research uses them as guinea pigs for undisclosed objectives beyond their and their immediate 'gate-keepers' comprehension.

CONCLUSION

There is much to offer both the researcher and the children in participating in research. There is a shortage of material available to children on issues important to them, and this can be a means of providing this information. Research with children acknowledges their role and rights in their own development, while also bringing their issues to the attention of society.

This brief is published as part of REPOA's programme "Research with Children" which commenced in 2004 and has been largely funded by UNICEF. The programme aims to:

- a) Obtain information about children's needs and rights and the extent to which their needs are met and rights realised,*
- b) Explore factors that affect children's rights, and*
- c) Understand the coping strategies adopted by children and caregivers to overcome or mitigate the negative impacts of problems affecting the realisation of children's rights.*

Researchers are invited to submit proposals to REPOA for research grants on these areas.

REPOA has developed a database of research work relating to children that was undertaken in Tanzania over the past ten years. The database contains research reports on various issues affecting children's rights in Tanzania, including health, education, nutrition, and HIV/AIDS. Reports are available in REPOA's library, as well as other material relating to children's rights and conducting research with children.

The photos in this brief are of children from the Temeke Municipal Children's Council, who enthusiastically participated in a course on conducting research with children, which was hosted by REPOA. REPOA is grateful to these children for their support of this training.

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