



## Exploring the links between child and youth participation and development effectiveness: A joint-research and learning partnership

JACKIE ROBERTSON,<sup>1</sup> SALLY ASKER,<sup>2</sup> ANNA GERO,<sup>3</sup> NATALIE ABEL,<sup>4</sup> MEL HARWIN,<sup>5</sup> ANTHONY SELL,<sup>5</sup> RICHARD GEEVES<sup>1</sup> and JULIET WILLETTS<sup>3</sup>

### 1. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Interest in the role of child and youth participation and its influence on development effectiveness from both practitioners and academics has been growing in recent years. In 2011 and 2012, following formal and informal discussions, members of the ACFID Child Rights Working Group identified this area as a gap in the research. Further, in both 2011 and 2012, ChildFund Australia commissioned literature reviews to gather documented research on this topic (ChildFund Australia, 2011, and Asker et al., 2012). The second review involved working with a university partner, the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) at the University of Technology, Sydney, and confirmed the need for further empirical research, such as field-based research, in order to establish an in-depth understanding of the importance of child and youth participation in development effectiveness.

Consultation held between interested ANGOs led to the formation of a research and learning partnership to explore the issue through a dedicated research project. Initially, it involved three ANGOs, ChildFund Australia, the leading ANGO on the partnership; Transform Aid International; and Plan International Australia. The partnership then extended to include a university partner – the Institute for Sustainable Futures and an independent consultant, InSIGHT Sustainability. It was agreed that the research would focus, through a case study approach, on a community-based project elected by each ANGO with a strong child and youth participation component. To allow findings to be examined across a range of geographical and cultural contexts, countries were selected from Asia (Nepal for Transform Aid International and Laos for ChildFund Australia) and the Pacific (Plan’s regional project). Unforeseen changes at Plan International Australia resulted in their contribution to the research being solely financial. Live & Learn Australia, through their Fiji Office, became involved in the project as the third NGO partner with a Pacific focus. Further details of the ANGOs involved and their in-country partners and projects on which the research is founded are explained in Table 1.

**Table 1: Case study details of joint research and learning partnership**

ANGO	In-country partner	Case study location	Project for research and learning
ChildFund Australia	ChildFund Laos	Laos	Child and youth in sports (sport for development as a part of a broader participation project)
Transform Aid International	United Mission to Nepal and Prayas	Nepal	Children and youth in community development (Child clubs activity implemented with broader Child centered community development project)
Live and Learn Australia	Live and Learn Fiji	Fiji	Fiji community development project for youth-led environmental management

<sup>1</sup> ChildFund Australia; <sup>2</sup> InSIGHT Sustainability; <sup>3</sup> Institute for Sustainable Futures; <sup>4</sup> Independent Consultant;

<sup>5</sup> Transform Aid International



Two additional levels of research partners were then established: in-country partners for each ANGO (Nepal, Laos and the Pacific, see Table 1) and a Peer Review Group (PRG), comprised of seven Australian based child rights, development and research experts to provide high level support to the ANGOs. The timeframe for the research project spans from 2013 to 2016 and, at the time of writing, initial data collection has begun.

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE

The overarching objective of the research is to explore the links between child and youth participation and development effectiveness. The research is seeking to understand and learn more about this link, and build an evidence base to generate knowledge and inform learning to benefit in-country partners, ANGOs and the broader international development community. There is a wealth of literature and documented experience around the various models of child and youth participation (e.g. Hart, 1992; UNICEF, 2002), and 'how' participation is done (e.g. DFID, 2010; Harper et al., 2010). However, much less documented literature, evidence or case studies exploring the link between child and youth participation and development effectiveness is available.

The research will focus primarily on two learning areas to achieve the research objective (see Box 1). An additional topic identified by ANGOs is 'learning through reflection', which will be conducted as a separate activity by each participating ANGO. The outcomes of the research seek to benefit in-country partners, ANGOs and the broader international development community.

In addressing the aims and objectives of the research, anticipated benefits of the partnership to ANGOs include improved and more effective programming and potential research-based support of the benefits of child and youth-centred approaches for promotional purposes. Anticipated benefits to university partners include the opportunity to participate in applied development-focused research, assist with developing robust research methodology, and contribute academic thinking to the area of child and youth participation in development.

## 3. RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE

**The benefits of the joint research and learning partnership are many, allowing for the research project to extend beyond the capacity of one organisation.** As a result of the involvement of three ANGOs, the geographical reach and subsequent research findings will be greater than if it were only a single organisation. Similarly, ISF and InSIGHT Sustainability involvement as core research partners provide technical research capacity to the ANGOs and the potential for upskilling through training on research analysis techniques. The partnership has also been extended through encouraging collaboration with the PRG providing further technical backstopping, with child rights and development specialists available to support the research. The PRG is also a helpful means of 'testing' if the research will be beneficial for the broader international development community. Working with in-country partners helps ensure that the research is applied, practical and more relevant to the communities they're working with. Further, it allows a degree of capacity building for research, as in-country

### Box 1: Research Learning Areas

Learning Area 1: Learning about the contribution of child and youth participation to development effectiveness outcomes

Learning Area 2: Learning about the contribution of child and youth participation to organisational level and/or program/project outcomes

ANGO learning through reflection: focus on the process of conducting research on child and youth participation



research partners are heavily involved in data collection and initial analysis of results.

**Key to establishment of the research partnership overall, has been through a process of negotiating and establishing contractual agreements.** First, a Joint Research and Learning Partnership was formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the participating ANGOs. The MoU was developed in the early stages of the partnership and outlined clear roles and responsibilities of each partner as well as the aims, objectives and further details of the research itself. High-level commitment by each partner was considered important and it was signed by the CEO/Director of each organisation. Second, contractual arrangements for the research were developed and signed between ISF and ChildFund Australia (in the role of lead ANGO), detailing the work expected over the three-year timeframe and related budget commitments, as well as with InSIGHT Sustainability for technical project support. In its position as lead ANGO, ChildFund Australia has played a pivotal role in leading and managing the MoUs, contracts and relationships between organisations as well as the relationship with the PRG. A strong staff champion and driver within ChildFund Australia has been a key success factor. These formal arrangements (MoUs and contracts) were important as they outlined a common purpose and agreed scope of work which was helpful to overcome potential challenges associated with staff turnover.

**Differing roles of the research partners were based on organisational and individual skills and capacities and 'value-add'.** For ANGO partners, this included support and coordination of research progress with in-country partners and for the academic partner this included providing support on ethics and consent processes, training on research techniques and analysis, and conducting synthesis of research findings.

**A Research Plan was developed documenting roles and responsibilities, research aims and objectives, timelines and activities, field methods, research data collection and ethics.** Areas of debate and discussion in formulating the research plan included: (a) the extent to which a research design that could 'prove' a link between child and youth participation and development effectiveness could be developed or whether a more realistic aim was to simply learn about that link; (b) appropriate and meaningful definitions of 'development effectiveness'; (c) how to enable sufficient support and training to in-country research teams to ensure the integrity of the research process. These areas were resolved through discussions and meetings between the partners.

**A detailed Research Planning Guide was also developed for in-country partners by the ANGOs.** This provided in-country partners with guidance on the research project's objectives, timeframes and desired outputs, a planning tool to use when designing their in-country research plans, and possible data collection tools. Some mandatory tools were also included to ensure a level of consistency across case study locations; however, after training and orientation in-country, the tools needed to be contextualised according to language and advice from the local partners. Summary versions of this planning guide were produced for different audiences including community members and children and youth.



Joint research partners saw their research project as an opportunity to develop a robust and rigorous approach to research ethics, with a view to enable learning amongst the in-country partners and the development sector. As such, comprehensive Ethics Guidelines were developed with the support of the PRG for all partners to adhere to throughout the project. In particular, strong consideration was given to the understanding of ethical research when working with children and youth. During the in-country data collection training with local partners, the Ethics Guidelines were introduced through a participatory workshop with the research team. Significant time was allowed for learning and planning for the orientation and implementation of the research ethics at community level. For more information, refer to the ACFID case study on ethics for this research.<sup>2</sup>



*United Mission to Nepal ethics and data analysis training conducted by Transform Aid International*

#### 4. RESEARCH OUTCOMES AND UPTAKE

Thus far, ANGOs have conducted research training and capacity development for in-country partners. Crucial to ensuring the willingness of in-country partners' participation has been to provide a clear idea of the purpose and objectives of the research through dedicated training. ANGOs acknowledge that the research project could be seen to create additional work for in-country partners. To overcome this, ANGOs provided motivation to participate through an inclusive research process and provision of new skills that can extend beyond the lifetime of this research project.

The ANGOs are committed to sharing their learning about the contribution of child and youth participation to development effectiveness. At the outset of the research, the ANGOs presented on the research topic at a number of NGO and academic forums. Furthermore, in 2015 and 2016 there are plans to share the outcomes of the research with the Australian development and academic sector during specific sector events. Moreover, the findings will be used internally to reflect on and strengthen individual organisations' programming approaches.

#### 5. LEARNING AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

The process of undertaking joint research has not been without its challenges. Since the inception of the idea of data collection, three to four years have passed. Some key lessons include:

- High staff turnover in all organisations involved over this time has revealed the importance of documenting the research framework and approaches.
- Adequate human resourcing is essential, with all partners needing a key person identified as the driver of the research. Additionally, both a budget and a commitment to contribute to not only each organisation's own data collection activities, but to the wider ANGO budget requirements, is needed.

<sup>2</sup> A part of the ACFID University Network Case Study Series: Ethical Research in Development.



- Obtaining buy-in from each ANGO (including management, programs teams and other departments) has been essential. This has been important for ensuring that interest and commitment to the research remain high among all partners, particularly given the changing aid and development environment in which budgets are contracting.
- Conducting research in partnership has also included regular meetings amongst partners to develop tools and processes and to catch up on progress at each case study site. ANGOs aim to include in-country partners in broader research discussions as much as possible in order to create an environment in which they are a key part of the research process.
- Balancing academic approaches with the needs of ANGO partners has been essential to an effective partnership. A key lesson has been to ensure that technical support is provided (e.g. through technical advice, provision of research training or upskilling) in such a way that incorporates academic rigour whilst also addressing the needs and relevance to the ANGO and its partners.

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The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID)

14 Napier Close, Deakin ACT 2600

Private Bag 3, Deakin ACT 2600 Australia

P: +61 2 6285 1816

F: +61 2 6285 1720

E: [main@acfid.asn.au](mailto:main@acfid.asn.au)

[www.acfid.asn.au](http://www.acfid.asn.au)