

# Beyond consultation: in support of more meaningful adolescent participation

by Jane Lowicki



*In 2000, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children initiated a 'series of four action-oriented, participatory studies with adolescents affected by armed conflict'.*

Unpacking this mouthful of jargon and explaining that the idea would involve intensive research and advocacy designed and conducted by adolescents themselves, we asked young people in Kosovo (2000), northern Uganda (2001) and Sierra Leone (2002) about their interest in getting involved.<sup>1</sup> We expected them to be concerned about the fact that we could not guarantee that concrete programmes for adolescents would follow the research. Surprisingly, however, they were mainly astounded to be asked to take control of a project focused on **their** concerns as defined by **them**.

In each site, adolescents uniformly revealed severely limited opportunities for their participation in decision-making processes dominated by adults. When opportunities did exist, particularly in humanitarian operations, the nature of the participation often went little further than young people being consulted or asked to carry out the preordained wishes and objectives of adults.

Youth leader, Ngolo Katta, who with other young people coordinated the research study in Sierra Leone, said, 'This approach is totally unique. It's never been done before in Sierra

Leone. Usually we are just handed a request for information and told to rally the youth, follow up and deliver. If we question the process or make suggestions, it is not received well. And usually, if we do the research, we never hear from the people requesting it again.'

The simple act of saying to young people, 'We'll give you support as you need it but you decide what's important to you. You decide how it will work best. You manage the money,' and so on, appeared revolutionary. Yet, adolescents are at a time in their development when they are formulating their identities, actively preparing for adulthood and needing to take action on their own behalf. Many adolescents affected by war are thrust into adult roles prematurely, becoming soldiers, mothers and fathers, heads of households, husbands and

*Adolescent researchers learn communication skills, Sierra Leone*

wives, principal wage earners and more, with extremely limited support. They also form informal support groups, drama and sports clubs, income-generation groups and more.<sup>2</sup> In this context, participatory methodologies involving young people without their having a significant level of control over inputs and outcomes are absurd and belittling.

### The (unfulfilled) right to participation

As 191 nations of the world rally around the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)<sup>3</sup> (with only the USA and Somalia yet to ratify) and as the UN and NGOs explore, develop and test 'rights-based' approaches to programming, the issue of fulfilling children's right to participation (Article 12, CRC) is a hot one. Various methodologies or approaches, including participatory rural appraisal, people-oriented planning and a number of peer-to-peer/child-to-child approaches have substantially advanced understanding among international humanitarian agencies of the value of and need for involving 'beneficiary populations' in mapping exercises, assessments and social surveys, as well as programme implementation. Organisations and associations such as UNICEF, UNHCR, the International Save the Children Alliance (ISCA) and the International Rescue Committee have also developed in-house approaches to participation with a rights perspective. Donor governments at times even stipulate that community or beneficiary involvement be a measurable component of project implementation.

With some important exceptions, however, preliminary findings across the three research sites show that attempts to incorporate adolescents into programme decision making as ostensibly equal partners are limited. Organisations are often satisfied if a

This follows a general trend where 'beneficiary' populations are viewed as just that, those assumed to benefit from something but who are decidedly separate and distinct from the benefactor. It also reflects understandings of child protection to be principally about adults protecting children as opposed to a more collaborative approach where young people, who think and act on their own behalf, are not solely the objects of protection. For example, few refugee community volunteers responsible for child protection monitoring are actually children or adolescents, or their incorporation into such work is delayed, while adults are involved first when key decisions are made.

A comparative study analysing key findings across the four sites will be forthcoming from the Women's Commission. With adolescents and adults working together on the analysis, it will take an in-depth look at the issue of adolescent participation in different aspects of young people's lives - inside and outside the home. It will identify patterns in the practices of organisations developing and using adolescent-focused participatory methodologies, including in assessments, decision making, programme design, implementation and evaluation. Some highlights of achievements in these areas will include the promotion of child- and adolescent-centred participatory learning environments, young people's direct involvement in family tracing and reunification, and increased adolescent access to international policy discussions such as the UN Special Session on Children.

### Field study methodology and lessons learned

The object of the Women's Commission's work with adolescents is to improve knowledge about the situation of adolescents in armed conflict and conduct advocacy to strengthen relevant policy and increase services and protection to them in humanitarian emergencies and during reconstruction activities. It began with a desk study, *Untapped Potential: Adolescents Affected by Armed Conflict* (2000)<sup>4</sup>, which identified achievements and gaps in policy and programmes affecting adolescents in conflict areas. *Untapped Potential*

revealed a need to document adolescents' experiences, determine patterns and practices in humanitarian response addressing their concerns and identify solutions and ideas for improving their well-being. The series of four studies, subsequent comparative study and related advocacy seek to further all of these goals.

In each field site two research teams worked in two parts of the country. Each team had roughly 26-28 adolescent researchers and seven to nine adult research advisors. Their work was coordinated by a youth coordination group, preferably comprised of a local youth NGO or youth group. The Women's Commission and other interested groups or organisations in the region facilitated and advised the work of the teams.

The researchers - half girls, half boys - ranged in age from 10 to 19 years. They represented a variety of adolescent experiences - former soldiers, adolescent mothers, orphans, in school, out of school, working, refugees, internally displaced, disabled and more. The majority were literate but some were not. Few had conducted research before, and most had experienced a break in their formal education due to the conflict. All aspects of the project were conducted in their native languages, with interpretation as necessary.

Each research team participated in a three-day training where the Women's Commission presented them with one central question - what are the main problems of adolescents, and what are some solutions? The teams learned about and practised research methodologies, communication skills, listening and interviewing skills, note taking and reporting objectively, ethically and accurately. The teams spent a lot of time designing their own research study, developing detailed questions to ask their peers and adults about a range of issues they identified as important. The Women's Commission and other local trainers did not suggest topics or questions to them or go into any depth of explanation about human rights or child protection concepts. Invariably, however, the young people raised issues covering a full range of rights and protection concerns, while calling them by other names. Their methodologies included focus group

### *Most young people say they feel marginalised*

number of young people's opinions have been heard before implementing projects for them. Opportunities for building young people's capacity through their deeper involvement are often missed, ultimately affecting the sustainability and relevance of programmes. Most young people say they feel marginalised from those whose job it is to support them.

discussions, individual case studies and a written survey of most pressing adolescent concerns. The research sessions ultimately included an hour-and-a-half of focus groups led by one adolescent, where two adolescents took notes and an adult advisor assisted as needed. This was followed by the written survey, and each adolescent researcher was responsible for developing two case studies through individual interviews that they initiated.

### *their collective voice provided powerful information*

The researchers practised these activities in the training. Adults practised holding back from controlling the adolescents' activities and instead advised as needed. The researchers designed T-shirts for themselves and made a detailed research plan, determining which groups they would speak to and where – secondary and primary school students, adolescent mothers, ex-combatants, refugees, elders, adolescent petty traders, and others. The initial research took about a month and was implemented completely by the teams. Each team and the Women's Commission wrote reports based on the findings and they worked together to plan and

carry out advocacy activities bringing the young people's recommendations to decision makers and others. This involved national and international travel for some researchers, elected by their teammates.

Many of the young people involved in the project as researchers went on to initiate projects, form active youth groups, conduct more advocacy, train other young people and more. The participation of the thousands of

respondents, however, was limited

to the few hours spent with the research teams. Unless the teams returned to the communities (which they did) or an organisation began to work with them, the impact of their participation on their lives was limited. At the same time, their collective voice provided powerful information that was used to effect change in the lives of many adolescents.

While the Women's Commission studies are principally qualitative and focused on research and advocacy, they provide lessons to those undertaking all sorts of interventions in other sectors and phases of humanitarian response and prevention. The

lessons are also broadly applicable in classroom and other settings. The comparative study will include more on this.

To access the Women's Commission adolescents reports, visit [www.womenscommission.org](http://www.womenscommission.org) and click on 'reports'.

**Jane Lowicki is Senior Coordinator, Children and Adolescents Project, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. Email: [janel@womenscommission.org](mailto:janel@womenscommission.org)**

1. A fourth site, in Asia, will be the focus of the fourth participatory research project.

2. See *Making the Choice for a Better Life, Promoting the Protection and Capacity of Kosovo's Youth*, Women's Commission, 2001, pp 56-58; and *Against All Odds: Surviving the War on Adolescents, Promoting the Protection and Capacity of Ugandan and Sudanese Adolescents in Northern Uganda*, Women's Commission, p 51.

3. See [www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm](http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm)

4. Jane Lowicki *Untapped Potential: Adolescents Affected by Armed Conflict*, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2000, pp 4-5.

### **Adolescent participation: some lessons learned**

- Adolescents are a source of enormous and invaluable ability, creativity, energy and enthusiasm, and their ideas are important and valuable.
- Adolescent participation is necessary and achievable and may take many forms.
- Adolescents enjoy and learn from being engaged in constructive activities, especially those where they are making decisions, providing leadership and taking action, and their participation builds their capacity in ways that are useful to their lives beyond the tasks at hand.
- While participatory processes can empower young people, they can also further manipulate them, depending on the level to which adolescents are consulted and able to make choices – full participation goes beyond consultation to opportunities for leadership.
- Involving young people in research and assessment work places them in a position to advocate on their own behalf and enter community discussions using information and knowledge gained, adding legitimacy to their contributions.
- Adults can and should support adolescents' participation in a variety of important ways, requiring them to suspend authority structures that favour their opinions and contributions.
- The variations in experience, skills and perceptions, including about themselves, that young people bring to their activities influence the quality and nature of young people's participation.