



THE CONCERNED FOR
Working Children

Colloquium on
Children and Governance: Holding States Accountable

Children's Impact on Governance

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July 2009

Overarching Issues

Early this year, we learnt of a *Sangkat*, an urban local government unit in Cambodia, that is renowned because it has members from Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) on its decision making body. This unique positioning enables the NGOs to represent the concerns of women and children in the local government. They also provide financial assistance to the local government and this contribution is listed in the official budget line of the government and is reported on. The national and international agencies in Cambodia are appreciative of this model and are considering its replication.

Examples such as these abound, showcased as ‘good practices’ and are often considered worthy of emulation in the children’s rights arena.

Unfortunately, they are not recognised as illustrations of how adults repeatedly declare themselves as self appointed advocates of children, position themselves as the ‘spokespersons’ of the young people they are engaged with and in essence, monopolise the spaces through which children should exercise their right to self determination in order to improve the nature and quality of their lives.

The Right to Self Determination is the foundation of the Rights Discourse. Without it, all engagement with the civil society will only be either limited to providing protection or provisions – as determined by those who have the power to dispense them.

Yet, it is the least recognised of children’s rights – even the well intentioned child rights activists are very often guilty of being ignorant of its full import. According to Richard Farson¹; *“The issue of self determination is at the heart of children’s liberation. It is, in fact, the only issue, a definition of the entire concept”*. For adults, since it challenges the power equation between us and the children, it is perhaps the most difficult to internalise and practise. Yet, it is important to realise that for all those who are committed to children, respecting children’s Right to Self Determination is not an option, but an obligation, failing which we stand guilty as violators of their rights.

This Right is clearly articulated in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Currently, the Committee of the UNCRC is deliberating about a General Comment on it as the Periodic Country Reports presented before it indicate a very poor understanding and reporting of the Right to Participation among the Governments from around the world.

¹ Richard Farson, Birthrights, 1974 (from the book ‘Children - Rights and Childhood, David Archard).

Children's Right to Participation has its roots in Human Rights Law. It makes it mandatory that children have the Right, not only to access appropriate protection and provisions – but most importantly, have a Right to determine the nature and quality of those protective measures and the provisions. There are numerous examples from around the world in which this Right is given scant regard, by the State and the civil society, resulting in a range of rights violations ranging from aggravated hardships for children to unfulfilled expectations and dejection.

For the Right to Self Determination to be exercised most effectively, there is a need for participation that either leads to or is a result of 'empowerment' which ensures 'mutual' accountability between the rights holders and the duty bearers. This is true of any meaningful protagonism and applies to children as well. Their participation should embody processes that empower them to negotiate with the duty bearers. In this framework, the concept of 'children and governance' implies that children's Right to Self Determination applies to decision making processes of all duty bearers, including the State and to ensure that their 'citizenship' is recognised.

However, at present children lack spaces through which they can voice their views and opinions without the fear of retaliation. At best, sadly, they end up being dependent on adult advocates, such as parents or NGOs, to 'speak on their behalf'. As a result of this situation of dependency, they most often forfeit their right to hold their adult advocates accountable.

Hence creating spaces where children can effortlessly and confidently represent themselves in decision making processes, in a protective and nurturing environment, is one of the most important obligations we adults shoulder.

Children's Rights is a relatively new area of 'development' and there are very few avenues that are available to its advocates to table issues related to them. Children, even more so, lack mechanisms to hold various stakeholders accountable, including the primary duty bearers, in both private and public arenas.

A few rarefied spaces that did emerge for 'children's participation' in the last decades have been mostly in the international arena – because Children's Rights have begun to gain currency, and rightly, so to a certain extent in international policy related consultations.

One of the most famous examples of this has been the UN General Assembly Special (UNGASS) of 2002. Here is the official view of the children's participation at the exalted UN level.

The Special Session was a landmark, the first such Session devoted exclusively to children and the first to include them as official delegates..... For several reasons, the participation of children and adolescents at the Special Session represents a real breakthrough at the United Nations. ...They presented their views in the statement 'A World Fit for Us', at the opening of the General Assembly debate, formally addressing the Assembly on behalf of children for the first time in the United Nations history. They participated in great numbers at the Special Session as delegates from either non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or governments. Finally, they were also actively involved in a number of official meetings and key supporting events.²

Those of us who followed the process closely and also had a ring-side view did not experience it quite the same way. To begin with, children and young people had not been informed that by the time they had a chance to interact, in the 'unofficial' spaces with the governmental delegates, or 'view the official proceedings from the gallery'; most of the important decisions related to 'A World Fit for Children' were not only taken, but also available in print.

It was a sorry sight to see children from around the world, some of whom had met their 'accompanying' adults for the first time at the airport prior to departure, carrying thick volumes of UN documentation, trying to make sense of the UN labyrinth. It was not clear through what processes many of the children who reached New York were selected and whose mandate they carried as representatives of the children of the world.

There, the only children who were able to negotiate some opportunities were the children who represented the working children's movements. They had a long history of being organised and fighting their way into the international child labour debates. So in partnership with their collaborating adults they had carried out extensive planning to organise parallel events during the UNGASS. Through these, some of their views were heard by a few policy makers, but they too were not timely enough to have a real impact on either the main document or the heated 'political' debates over semantics that were taking place in the inner chambers among diplomats.

For most children, such 'top heavy' consultative processes that have very little or no scope for real influence make a mockery of their Right to Self Determination. The building blocks of meaningful children's participation should be laid much lower down, closest to their own communities where they have sustained access to local level 'decision makers' and where they are recognised as 'individuals' and not just another representative sample. When their base is set firmly in the arenas closest to them, only then will children be able to engage with decision makers at higher levels

² The United Nations General Assembly Special Session website: <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/>

from a position of strength because then they will have an unquestionable mandate, unified purpose and a high degree of accountability to the children they represent.

The organised democratic participation of children and youth gives them collective strength, increased access to information, greater confidence, an identity and ownership over their initiatives. It actively inculcates values of inclusion. Individual children or youth who represent their own groups within its framework voice the views and aspirations of the collective.

What needs to be ensured is that all children and youth have an equal right to participate in the development of this collective voice, if not the hierarchies that exists in the adult world will find insidious ways to replicate themselves and to perpetuate among children as well.

Children's coming together also enables them to find collaborative ways to address their problems. It contributes to preserve and add a new vibrancy to a culture of egalitarianism, secularism and equity. While all these have a great value for all children, its significance is phenomenal for children who are the most marginalised.

“Participation can build capacity for active citizenship, good governance and sustainable development of communities. When children, especially the most marginalized, have opportunities to express their views, access information, form associations, participate in decisions that affect them and take action to fulfil their rights, they are often more able to protect themselves, claim their rights and hold adults accountable”.

“However, child participation should not be seen in isolation. It is related to participation as a human right for empowering and engaging children, families and communities. The mobilization and participation of children and communities is important for claiming child rights and addressing social norms that perpetuate acceptance of discrimination, violence, abuse, exploitation and the non-participation of children.”³

Children and the State

The state of democracy in India is highly precarious. These are times when political accountability is at an abysmal low, fundamentalism and parochialism are flourishing, civil society movements are largely fragmented and corporate governance and privatisation are gearing up to high-jack democracy to fulfil the personal aspirations of the elite. Those who are marginalised are further impoverished as the social security nets are full of gaping holes. The governments

³ Children's and adolescents' participation and protection from sexual abuse and exploitation, Clare Feinstein, Clare O'Kane, Innocenti Working Papers, 2009-09

closest to them either do not exist (for example, the shining IT City Bengaluru has not had elections for its urban local government for over two years) or where they do, are constantly under the pressure of the power centres located higher up that are determined to render them toothless.

In such a setting, when the notion of citizenship is questionable for adults, for children it is even more elusive. They have very few, if any, ‘real life’ experiences of democracy either at home or in public spaces like work, school or State. As a signatory of the UNCRC, our State has a national obligation to ensure that all rights of our children are realised. In order to progressively attain that, it has to ensure that the Principle of the Best Interest of the Child and their Right to Participation – that is embodied in their Right to Self Expression, Right to Association and Right to Information are upheld at all costs.

Informed and organised participation is the key to effective protagonism of children, especially those who are most marginalised. Children need to have the collective strength as well as knowledge, skills and tools for accessing, analysing and using information to make logical and constructive interventions on their own behalf and also to advocate for effective solutions with policy makers.

Children’s participation in State Governance

In most cultures, children and youth are kept away from ‘politics’ as it is considered ‘bad’ for them until they are 18 years old. At the dawn of this biological milestone, they are expected to attain sufficient civil and political maturity to participate in direct democracy as members of the Grama Sabha or in indirect democracy as the electoral constituency of the various levels of State. It is no surprise that the young adults of India, having had no practical experience of participatory democracy fall despairingly short of this expectation. Nurturing our young within a framework of constitutional obligations and a secular national identity is the most urgent need of our times.

Their effective participation depends largely on platforms for their participation. While such platforms created by Non Governmental Agencies may temporarily mitigate the situation, it is mainstream decision making structures that have to embody the platforms through which children can exercise their right to participation.

The creation of such mainstream structures should start from the bottom, and the local governments are the most appropriate place to start. On one hand they are the policy making bodies that are most accessible to children on a regular basis. On the

other, they, as an elected body have to be accountable to their constituencies, which most certainly include children. They also have the political and administrative jurisdiction that mandates them to develop plans, monitor them and to manage resources.

When children's participation in State governance is enabled, they are able to exercise their right to self-determination in order to express their views and needs, hold the State accountable to its commitments and to learn about democracy through their own experience of it.

Three examples from Karnataka

Despite recognising the right of children to participate in decision-making processes, it is often debated worldwide whether or not children have the potential to articulate their concerns and influence the decision-making at the level of local state governance. Here are three examples from India, which have proved, for several years now, that children's participation in governance is not only critical for children to realise their Rights, but that it is also fundamental to protect, nurture and strengthen democracy.

Makkala Grama Sabha – Children's Grama Sabha

A Grama Sabha of a Village Panchayat⁴ is the only political space available for its citizens to directly participate in a democratic manner to plan and monitor the development of their village. While such Sabhas (meetings) are prescribed for the adults of the village in our Decentralisation Act, they are not considered relevant to 'children' as the popular understanding is that children are 'citizens of tomorrow', not of today.

The Concerned for Working Children⁵ (CWC) organised the first Children's Grama Sabha in Keradi, a Panchayat in the Udupi District of Karnataka in the year 2002.

'Makkala Grama Sabhas' are especially meant for children and are modelled on the adult Gram Sabhas. They are essentially a meeting between the local government and all the young citizens who are its constituency. During this meeting, children interact directly with the local government. In addition to responding to children

⁴ The Village Panchayat is the lowest level of administration in the system of local government. The term Panchayat refers to both the geographical and administrative units, as well as the elected body, which acts as the local council. A Panchayat is composed of a cluster of villages and several Panchayats constitute a Taluk.

⁵ CWC is a pioneering organisation in child labour, children's rights and civil society participation with an emphasis on children's participation. www.workingchild.org

and reporting on actions taken, the local government also presents the status of Children's Rights in the village to the children and the entire community.

The audience at the first children's Grama Sabha included Vinay Kumar Sorake, the then Member of the Indian National Parliament as well as several members of the three tiers of the local governments. Responding to the creative and powerful presentations made by children, Mr. Sorake said, *"A formal interaction between children and their governments of this kind is exemplary. Children have pointed out very specific problems and have also suggested specific solutions. All their points have been backed with detailed statistics. Most often the adult Panchayats or the concerned departments do not have such in-depth information. I highly appreciate the fact that children first conducted surveys and held discussions among themselves before presenting the points here. This children's Gramasabha, held in Keradi, one of the most remote Panchayats of Karnataka, should become a role model for all Panchayats"*.

"It is now absolutely clear to me why children's participation is critical to strengthen local government" said a Panchayat President, after the Children's Grama Sabha. *"Children not only list their problems, they also describe the implications of the problems and the importance of addressing them. This has been extremely useful to us to develop our action plans."*⁶

When the Karnataka Government, through its Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department issued a circular two years ago that made it mandatory for all the elected members of the 5653 Gram Panchayats of Karnataka State to conduct Children's Grama Sabhas to 'listen' to their young citizens once a year and be accountable to them – it was a celebration for those of us who have been advocating for children's right to be heard for decades.

Until now, the Grama Sabhas, like most other public spaces, have been denied to children. Hence this commendable decision by the Government of Karnataka to categorically recognise the citizenship of children and to place children's rights at the centre of local governance is worthy of emulation world-wide.

Damodar Acharya, Executive Director, CWC explains, *"The children's Gram Sabha is an interface between children and the political system, perhaps the first of its kind. Unlike the many mock-parliament sessions which children participate in, what we have here is real and will*

⁶ Shankar Narayan Chatra, President of Hallihole Panchayat, Karnataka, 2003

surely lay the foundation for a very sound practice of children's participation. Processes such as these that start from the grassroots bring in long lasting transformations".

One of the challenges the children's Grama Sabha is going to face is from adults who may try to usurp this space that has been exclusively provided for children to make policy and programme suggestions. This is even more likely to happen where adults are not making the best use of their Grama Sabhas to impact on local government. Both children and the adults who facilitate them will have to guard against this kind of manipulation – that will not only violate the true spirit of the children's Grama Sabhas – but also put children under tremendous risk of negative repercussions.

So there is need for extensive capacity building of the local governments, children and all other stakeholders to ensure that this space provided for the participation of children in local governance is used optimally. Processes such as the Children's Grama Sabhas that evoke the true spirit of *Grama Swaraj* (Local Self Governance) by creating a generation of empowered youngsters have a very important role to play to strengthen decentralised democracy.

Makkala Panchayats (Children's Councils) in Karnataka

The Concerned for Working Children, has been working in the rural areas of Karnataka through the Toofan Panchayats Programme, which is a comprehensive programme of community development aimed at creating an environment where children are not involved in any form of work that is detrimental to their development, and where all children's rights are recognised and realised. The programme works for the empowerment of all the actors in the community, through their partnership and participation.

In 1995 Bhima Sangha⁷ and The Concerned for Working Children (CWC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development and Decentralisation, initiated the formation of Makkala Panchayats (Children's Councils) in five village Panchayats in Karnataka.

The Bhima Sangha had a long history of negotiating with representatives of governments in order to improve the quality of their lives and to address the causes that compelled them to labour. The rationale that led to the establishment of the Makkala Panchayats was that despite repeated interaction with local administrative and government bodies, Bhima Sangha felt that sustained impact was lacking. They

⁷ A union of, by and for working children in Karnataka facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children, with a membership of over 20,000, striving for the realisation of child rights

felt that a permanent structure that enabled close interaction between children and decision-making bodies was required in order to inform and influence local governments in a consistent manner. It could also ensure that children had opportunities to take part in decision making processes within their Panchayats.

During the process of creating the Makkala Panchayats, the members of Bhima Sangha noted that it was required not only by the organised 'working children' such as themselves, but by all children in order to speak up about their needs. Hence the structure of the Makkala Panchayats was designed to include different base groups of children such as working children, children with special needs, children from migrant communities and school going children.

The Makkala Panchayats are elected bodies. The voters are the children resident in the Panchayat in the age group of 6 to 18 years. The children who can contest are in the age group of 12 to 16 years. The elections for this Panchayat are conducted by the Village Panchayat and the Taluk Administration through a secret ballot.

Throughout the development of the Makkala Panchayats children put in great efforts for developing an appropriate protocol to define the mandate and structure of the Makkala Panchayats as well as the criteria for both the candidature and electorate. The Makkala Panchayat election criteria are revisited each term to ensure that the socially, economically and politically most marginalised groups of children have maximum representation.

“Children are not only discussing and trying to solve their problems through the Makkala Panchayat, but they are also showing the adults how to run the government in harmony. This process is now underway in only 56 Panchayats, the Government is trying to expand it to the rest of the State.”

These are the words of C.M. Udaasi, Minister, Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Government of Karnataka while releasing the book [Makkala Panchayat Protocol](#) at a consultation entitled 'Mainstreaming Informed Participation of Children in Governance' organised by CWC.

(Press release, CWC, December 11, 2006)

In order to link the Makkala Panchayats to the Village Panchayats, a tripartite Task Force has been set up. It consists of representatives of the Makkala Panchayats, elected members of the local government, government officials and community based organisations. The Task Force also exists at sub-district, or Taluk⁸, level to ensure that issues raised in the Makkala Panchayats are presented at higher levels. The regular involvement of high profile government officials increases the level of bureaucratic commitment. The close interaction between children and local government bodies creates a new form of political legitimacy for children on issues regarding their own welfare.⁹

Each Makkala Panchayat selects a Makkala Mitra or Children's Friend, an adult whom they feel they can trust and whom they can depend on for support within the Task Force and in the community. The Makkala Mitra's role is to take immediate action in cases where children request help individually or collectively. Children have with the help of the Makkala Mitra been able to address and solve problems independently of the Task Force.¹⁰

The Makkala Panchayats in Karnataka have given the local governments a new lease of life with their active involvement in not only identifying the problems they face, but also proposing solutions. They have made detailed presentations regarding the issues and problems they identified related to education, basic facilities, personal problems, gender discrimination, disability and child labour.

The issues collected from each ward are compiled after detailed discussions. When they list their problems, children make it amply clear that they have explored the matter thoroughly. They are able to not just raise a problem but also propose solutions that are most appropriate to them. They have clearly demonstrated how they can use political space to negotiate with the local governments and influence decision-making processes.

Experience has also shown that children always aim to use spaces constructively. They avoid confrontation and always seek win-win solutions. This is a value adult politics is urgently in need of.

Fourteen-year-old Sukumar, Vice President of the Keradi Children's Panchayat represents the feelings of the children when he says, *'until now, hardly any one had bothered to ask us what we thought or felt. This is the first time we had such an opportunity. We*

⁸ Sub-district level administrative body consisting of a cluster of Panchayats

⁹ National Curriculum Framework – Participation of all children, Nandana Reddy, member of General Council, National Council of Educational Research, India

¹⁰ Ibid

can solve some of our problems. For the others, the adults will have to be responsible. We will make them responsible.'

Over the years, the members of Makkala Panchayats and Bhima Sangha have conducted research studies, made interventions on the basis of the information they collect, lobbied with the officials at various levels for developments in their communities, collectively fought for their rights as children. They have made themselves heard in the state, national and international policy discussions and have advocated for consulting children in matters that concern them.

CWC has played an instrumental role in capacity building for both adults and children. This has resulted in children involved with the Makkala Panchayats becoming increasingly equipped with the means to deal with local government structures.

The Makkala Panchayats, the first of their kind in India, show the potential of children to articulate the problems in the village, substantiate their demands with data and to elicit responses that are rooted in a Children's Rights framework. Most importantly, they are a step towards recognising Children's Right to participate, voice concerns and ensure that the political decisions are made in partnership with them. They also demonstrate that children can think laterally and responsibly if efforts are directed towards recognising and building their capacities and giving them opportunities to participate in the decision-making process.

The Panchayat Level Five Year Planning Process – Children lead the way

The Government of Karnataka, for several years has been trying to initiate a localised planning process – in which each local government is expected to assess its own needs and develop its plans for the five years ahead – with active involvement of their constituencies. These plans by the local governments are to be the building blocks for a State Level planning process. However, many local governments do not have access to the required information, skills and support to develop such plans. In 2004, the State made several attempts to build capacities of the local governments to embark on a decentralised planning process. In some geographical areas, the State Government requested private developmental organisations in the region to provide assistance to the local governments.

In this context, CWC was requested by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Udupi District, in Karnataka, to support the 56 Village Panchayats to develop their own plans. We accepted the invitation, with one caveat – that was the demand for high level participation of children in the planning process. The Panchayats did not hesitate to admit that they lacked the expertise to involve children in such a process, but extended their total support to our proposal.

The output was remarkable. About 20,000 children were involved in the planning process. Their plans were comprehensive and substantiated with statistics and data. Groups and issues, such as the problems of the disabled, environmental concerns and issues related to mobility and transport, were covered for the first time in a five year plan. They also recorded the history of the village, degradation of resources, made maps of their Panchayats that were accurate and informative and in many cases, proposed solutions as well. The adults, especially the members and staff of the Gram Panchayats were astounded and in many cases shame-faced as the plans that the adults had drafted were very poor in comparison. As a result, by and large, the children's plans became the official plans of the Panchayats. But more than that, it has rejuvenated the Panchayats. The officials and elected representatives seem to be sensing a purpose and relevance to their work. They see their Panchayats in a new light and they have gained a deeper understanding of the Panchayat's needs and concerns. The gap between the local government and the people has diminished.¹¹

An overview of the survey of 56 Panchayats shows that education and school related issues recur in all the plans: compound walls, libraries, high school inaccessibility, school playground, drinking water, toilets, midday meals and teachers. A major difference made by school children in the planning process is that the plans used to be hijacked by powerful individuals to improve their own lives, people's participation being a mere catchword useful during elections. This time, women, children and entire Panchayats built up the children-led plan through regular ward meetings and data collection. For the first time, the Panchayat felt as if it owned the plan. To recall local, planning effort by gram Panchayats is mandated, since 1992, by Article 243G of the 73rd Amendment "to prepare village area plan for economic development and social justice".¹²

In retrospect, the involvement of children, their enthusiasm, their unerring sense of justice and their compassionate response to people's problems is what drew adults into this process. If children had not been the prime movers, adults would not have been involved in such large numbers and as in the past the task of drawing up the plans would have remained with the Secretary of the Gram Panchayat with some

¹¹ Nandana Reddy and Damodar Acharya, A Unique Revolution, CWC, 2004

¹² L.C. Jain, Former member of Planning Commission, and Former Ambassador of India to South Africa

inputs from some of the elected members. Adults are cynical and wary of any possible change because of their conditioning to the 'real world', whereas children still have hope and the belief that they can change the world. Their efforts, when they bear fruit, also serves as a role model for grown ups, and adults once again begin to have hope. Children also grow up, and if they have a positive experience of participation in governance they carry that with them into adulthood. Politics is an integral aspect of our life. Good politics is essential for the progress of any country. Here children have been involved in defining 'good politics'. This is not only a role model for children but also for adults in the entire country. The Five Year Planning process in Udupi District is one such experience.¹³

The impact

Through their engagements with the local governments, the most important impact on children has been the assertion of their citizenship and their right to question their governments, if need be. As a result, a de facto accountability on the part of the local administration and a transparency in their functioning has been created, that has not only benefited the children but the entire community.

The members of Makkala Panchayats have been resource persons in the State Capacity Building Programmes and have provided inputs on decentralised planning to over 82,000 elected adult Panchayat members. The entire Makkala Panchayat election process and governance that takes place outside the 'political party' framework has been an inspiration to many adults. All these have resulted in a paradigm shift in the way the Adult Panchayats view children. They acknowledge children's citizenship and have gained tremendous insights from the recommendations of children – which have resulted in child rights friendly village plans.

As a result, the adult Grama Sabhas and Village Panchayats too have become revitalised. The adults in the community have recognised that due to children's participation, many of their long standing issues have been addressed in a democratic manner. They have been a motivation for the adults to exercise their citizenship with vigour and a renewed confidence in democracy. Children, through their example, have made it possible for women to access the political space from which many of them have been excluded from. This is also true for members of the

¹³ Nandana Reddy and Damodar Acharya, A Unique Revolution, CWC, 2004

extremely marginalised communities from where initially children and now adults have begun to speak up.

As an organisation, CWC finds itself at a point in time when there is heightened awareness about Children's Rights as a concept – yet, there are too few examples in the governance that embody the true spirit of children's participation and protagonism. Though a high degree of appreciation is expressed about Makkala Panchayats – from people, organisations and governments – when the issue of going to scale arises, the questions that are posed are 'How can the capacities of adults be built to facilitate such structures and processes?', 'How can it be ensured that the Makkala Panchayats do not become corrupt?' 'How can it be ascertained that adults do not manipulate children?' These are issues that can be effectively addressed with systematic strategising, planning, capacity building and monitoring.

As CWC sees it, the key concerns are not these. The most important challenge for structures such as Makkala Panchayats today is the present political environment that is opposed to democratic decentralisation in our country. There are extremely well orchestrated and persistent moves from the higher powers to curtail the scope and strength of local governments. Instead of making attempts to build the capacities of the local governments that are closest to people – hence most accountable - often allegations are made about their inefficiency in order to justify the efforts to undermine the local governments.

As an organisation, CWC is coordinating a state level campaign that is countering the latest and the most blatant move by the State level elected representatives to take away crucial powers of the local governments. As a part of its work and the campaign advocating for decentralisation, CWC is generating debates and discussions about the need for meaningful decentralised governance that activates civil society participation – not as extensions of the state – but as a vibrant and alert group of people capable of countering injustice, challenging the status quo and defining development. The focus is on ensuring that the definition of 'civil society' includes children and all other groups that have been hitherto marginalised in social, economic and political spaces.

'Citizenship' of children remains a difficult concept and children's political participation is not acceptable to a large number of adults – world wide. However, it is time that all agencies realise that children have a right to actively determine the course of their lives and not enabling them to do so, to the best of their potential is a violation of their rights. Children and adults who have been actively part of local governments have had an education in democracy that no university can match.

They have proved, time and again, that they are political beings, capable of making extremely astute observations and evolving creative solutions.

In them lies the hope for a 'real democracy'.