

This article is by Fabrizio Terenzio, from the [Youth Action Team of ENDA](#), based in Dakar, Senegal.

*The parts of the article in italics give some examples of ENDA's work with the African Movement of Working Children and Youth.*

Since 1985, [Enda Tiers Monde](#), and its partners of the 'Calao African Network' (Reseau Africain Calao, RAC) have been building up a participative approach that facilitates the development and improvement of children's lives in Africa. The following points and thoughts have been recorded from this experience.

### **Children's participation is unavoidable**

In Africa, Children constitute a constant and active majority of the population. Culturally, they are in a position of 'respect' vis-à-vis the elder generation, but their demographic importance within a difficult context obliges them to play the part of economic, social, even 'political' actors amidst the tensions of their continent. Their 'role' or 'protagonism' can be seen as "good" when children decide to clean the local square, or to cultivate an old man's field. On the contrary, their role is seen to be 'bad' when they get in troubles, or even 'tragic' when they start to use weapons. Nonetheless, children's role therefore children's participation is a basic element in Africa.

'The unavoidable nature of participation' does not only derive from the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It derives from the experience of those who are close to the children and try to act 'with them or for them'.

By considering the repeated failures of these people's assistencial practices they were pushed to evolve towards the search for an effective children's participation, in the definition, the implementation and the evaluation of actions concerning them. The success and sustainability of children's support depends largely on their participation.

In some cases it is correct to ask oneself whether it is the child that has to participate in adult actions in his support (to act with) or whether it is the adult that has to support the child in his initiatives (act by). In the first case the child participates, in the second he is the protagonist.

In 1990-91, the RAC and Enda opted for the support of children's protagonism (support to child led action).

### **No child rights without their participation**

The 'child rights approach' derives from the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It has for this reason a precise date of birth, but it still has to be fully developed.

An element of confusion is the 'juridical' vision that many people have of the Convention. People consider it as a text of universal law, which must become 'national law' and then land inside everybody (or be imposed to everyone).

African children do not know the laws very well: they are confronted with them in painful situations, such as the law against 'hawking and begging' issued during the colonial period (in French-speaking countries). This law puts them into an illegal situation, while they are trying to help their family and themselves by undertaking economic activities in urban areas. The 'law' becomes in this way an instrument of repression that they must escape (police raids) or to which they have to submit by paying official or unofficial fines. The latter worsens their economic situation by decreasing their income.

On the other hand, they think they have rights (see [the twelve rights of working children](#)), stemming from 'God' and culture, rather than from an international convention. As long as the 'child rights approach' comes down to 'law application', it will exclude children who might be the most concerned by the Convention on the Rights of the Child while most deprived of rights.

By appropriating their rights, by rebuilding them through their own experience, African children not only become the 'defenders' of (their own) rights, but also the builders of rights with immediate effect on their everyday life.

*In July 1994, after the domestic girls and street workers march on labor day in Dakar, in order to 'show them, that we also are working everyday!' and solidarity actions in several towns of 5 countries, some delegates conveyed in Bouaké (Côte d'Ivoire) and identified 12 basic rights to build up in order to have a better life :in order to promote them, they designed a plan of action. The African Movement of Working Children and Youth (MAEJT-AMWCY) was born.*

By helping African children to take full control of their own rights, we are building a coherent and feasible 'child rights approach'. Without their participation we take the lead as "right defenders" and meanwhile relegate the children to a rank of 'animals or vegetables in danger', obviously unable to defend or build their own rights.

Nowadays, this dilemma doesn't exist anymore. The MAEJT-AMWCY is organized in 400 groups, in 57 towns, of 18 African countries. The 12 rights are commonly used, as a common framework, for situational analysis, and for action planning, by the working children.

### **Child participation is greatly welcomed by Africans**

'No rights without obligations, no rights without respect'. Starting with a consensus on these two points, child participation is greatly welcomed in Africa.

*The work of the African Movement of Working Children and Youth (AMWCY), after existing for 10 years, is proof of it. Their concrete action to build up rights has always been appreciated (from villages, where the WCY undertook many activities to prevent children's 'premature exodus'; to neighborhoods where they have been communicating with the community, the Community Based Organisations, as well as traditional and religious organisations; to towns where they have talked with the Mayors; to nations where they have interacted with Government Ministers and Presidents; to the United Nations Special Session on Children; without forgetting Trade Unions and the media.*

The acceptance of their 'social role' comes from rural traditions, in which each age group must play its part. In this way, by intervening in everyday life, the working children and youth readopted their 'traditional social role', from which modernity tended to exclude them.

Globally, the African forum in Cairo (in the preparatory process for the Special Session on children), in May 2001, marked the discovery by the African Community (Ministries, Civil Society, International Institutions and all kind of experts), of the 'healthy' nature of children's self expression and participation in a debate that was going to lay down the fundamental guidelines for action building an 'Africa fit for children'.

In April 2003, the African Union invited a delegate from the AMWCY- MAEJT to Mauritius for a meeting with its social commission. Some appeared unwilling to accept this 'innovation', however the majority of the participants Ministries and institutions supported his voice at this assembly.

In September 2003, the Economic Community of West African States, the regional organization of Western Africa, organised the 'peer review' on child policy. MAEJT and other children participated to its meeting, together with Ministers and the civil society. It was decided that in each country of the region, periodic reviews of the childhood policies would gather the Government with civil society organizations including child led organizations.

The children's statement together with the Minister declaration, were adopted in December 2003 by the heads of state. The implementation of the 'peer review' is now a crucial matter for the MAEJT, the African Global Movement for Children and the African NGO Coalition for children.

In some countries, like Senegal, the Government is even demanding to the AMWCY- MAEJT 'more participation' to increase its contribution to the policies, in order to enrich the national policies, definition and implementation.

### **The adult role is crucial**

Child participation does not mean the advent of a separated universe where only children are right. Children belong to a world where adults, firstly their parents, run into constant difficulties in their 'struggle to face poverty'.

Some years ago, a Working Child delegate expressed the harshness of everyday life by saying 'you always speak about children in difficult situations, why don't you take care of our parents in difficult situations?'

Thus, the efforts made to improve their future are closely connected to their parents' ones. The context of African children's participation is very different from that perspective of the rich countries' one.

Adults who facilitate children's efforts are often 'urban animators' to whom we offer little references for a participatory behaviour. The mandatory institutions do not practice participation

but mostly hierarchy. Often they are at the bottom of the scale of salary and power. They receive orders that they are compelled to execute everyday. How can we pretend that they have a participatory attitude towards children to whom, following this institutional hierarchy, they are inclined to give orders rather than encourage self-expression?

Often they have not sufficient guidelines to support them. They are told 'be participative!' but they are not told 'how?'. As if participation was part of their educational or vocational training background. Methodological training programmes on participation are rarely found in institutions supporting children, because the priority is given to 'field action' without having prepared the 'field for action'.

Facilitating participation may seem a thankless role. This is because on the one hand it continually demands to stand aside, in aid of children; on the other hand it requires a certain presence. Some make the mistake of interpreting the 'new rule of the game' as a way of distancing themselves from children who will 'decide on their own'. The presence of the animator has to be constant, even if sometimes it is only a physical (and moral) one with little right to speak, because it is a question of favouring someone else's expression, and not our own.

The African adult knows the role of the 'elder brother' very well, but this role is different from the support to participation, because it implies an authority which has not the right to express fully in this new context. An elder brother who must listen; might sometimes make recommendations; but can never command.

Satisfaction can and must come from the development of the quality of debates and decisions taken collectively by children, and above all from the superior quality of child led action and its results, unattainable in the past in the context of 'assistencial practices'.

After all, the original role of any educator is to softly disappear, as and while the child develops!

*The 'technical support group', is a common mechanism of adults and experimented youths of the MAEJT-AMWCY, teams are set up to monitor the development of the AMWCY/MAEJT, and*

*are available to support the local groups in order to solve problems, do lobbying, or initiate new actions. The expertise of accompanying adults and youths, is developed through training and evaluation yearly sessions. The African meeting of the MAEJT-AMWCY, (General Assembly, taking place every three years) evaluates the impact of technical support, and gives new guidelines for its contribution to the Movement for the future. In 2003, it was decided that each one of the towns where the Movement is organized will be visited at least once, by a team of one adult and one youth, during one week, before the next African meeting, planned for early 2006 in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso).*

### **Let's not demand children what we are unable to do ourselves.**

Learning participation is sometimes distressing, for adults as much as for children!

For adults, the constraints to participation other than the ones listed above, are linked to the slowness of participatory approach. Thus, sword of Damocles, whose effects are felt by the actors of participative programmes is always linked to their partners' questions: 'how much action? How many results?'.

As for the children, they are also linked to the greater responsibility that participation assumes. Once taken seriously by the adults, they are obliged to be much more serious than in the past, losing some privileges of being children, being carefree and sometimes contradictory.

Sometimes, they deplore the 'assistencial practice', it was yes unpleasant to receive orders, but the return was sometimes attractive: small material incentives, small blackmails that could be used vis-à-vis the institution. Goods and services received without having to know, neither how and why it was decided nor where they come from. Little lies that 'helped us to live'.

By taking responsibility the majority of these practices are excluded, furthermore such responsibility takes up a lot of time and energy!

This is probably why participatory experiences have mainly developed in Africa, Latin America and Asia among children living in the most difficult situations, and for whom the building up of the rights is not an abstract affair: working children have now the chance to learn how to read and write, to have access to healthcare, to be trained, to be respected, to escape from certain forms of repression, 'to take time out from their work' in order to express themselves and to

have fun!

But some adults react by demanding more and more. A thousand conditions are imposed on top of their participation: the language they are asked to use in order to express themselves is not their own language but an academic one; the meetings that they will attend will never be equally representative: one adult, one child, with equal time to express themselves, and equal right to diversity! Their Processes will have to be 'really democratic', as if the adult ones were. They will be asked to manage their funds in a way that adults very rarely do. They will be denied the right to make mistakes. The reluctance, the mistrust, the old reflex of a slightly timorous parent who keeps saying to his child that he must be brave in any circumstance!

There is still a long way to go to integrate children into our processes of thinking and deciding, and to become integrated into theirs...

### **"Good development" in question**

So, why so much effort? Because of a belief, a new slogan, a trend (Convention on the Rights of the Child) to which we are trying to adapt?

Everyday problems are not only solved by rights implementation and a good organization. Poverty is still there and is faced by the working children. Their work, is by itself a response, and contributes to poverty alleviation for themselves, and their family. It also has its impact on the economy.

*Since year 2000 the African Movement of Working Children and Youth have initiated a process of developing Income Generating Activities to increase their Movement's sustainability, and also to individually progress in life. Their ultimate goal is to contribute more and better to the growth of their community and country, 'life has made us learn how to work, we now want to get instruction and good training in order to help ourselves and help our countries to develop. Our right to light and limited work will make it possible to implement the 11 others, in order to achieve that goal'.*

From an African point of view, child participation represents a real hope, because until now the development models that have been adopted have never managed to exploit one of the main resources of development: children's energy and creativity!

African children are statistically evaluated according to inadequate parameters: random indexes, diagrams are drawn without the children knowing, or even having any say. The growing single and unique successful model is given by television, by globalized images: so many goods, so many Dollars: very expensive studies in foreign country to get the Dollars, and become somehow close to this model. Facing this image, the African child is condemned to feel like a drop out, poor, unfulfilled and condemned to learn how to steal in order to obtain the goods he is presented with.

The good development that we advocate, must include the African child: must offer him various chances of being educated and empowered at any stage of his development, for him to build and express its energies, to contribute to the development of a society that he will have helped to create through his own dreams and aspirations, and not the ones of a rich and faraway continent. The African model must relate to the young domestic servant who attends evening classes after a working day, in order to progress, to blossom and develop her family and society. African Economic Development (nowadays expressed by the [New Partnership for Africa's Development](#)) will include those who 'have learned to work or will not exist.

Building child inclusion and participation is a real stake for nowadays Africa and the future one.