



RESEARCH BRIEFING

Child-led research: From participating in research to leading it

Addressing inequalities in decision-making

BACKGROUND

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises children and young people's right to express their views on issues relevant to their lives. The UNCRC imposes a legal obligation on its signatories to take appropriate measures to fulfil this right. However, implementing participation rights has been challenging for countries and existing structures as it requires substantive changes to be made in how children and young people are viewed by society, ways of working and priorities. As models develop to address such limitations, child-led research has emerged as an approach that can provide children and young people with meaningful participation opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to critically explore how the processes and outcomes of children and young people's participation in child-led research contributed, positively or negatively, to decision-making in humanitarian and international development programme settings. This research examined two projects where children and young people conducted child-led research. The first case study, Dhaka, involved Bangladeshi children and young people researching birth certificates and the second, Bekaa & Irbid, was conducted by Syrian children and young people on issues relevant to their lives as refugees.

MAIN FINDINGS

Exploring young researchers' expertise and experiences as central components of child-led research: Young researchers were seen as better than adults at identifying issues of greatest importance to children and young people in similar situations to them. Young researchers asserted that they were able to obtain richer and more extensive data from their peers than adult researchers as they brought their own experiences to the analysis and findings. This makes claims on young researchers' expertise and ability to generate knowledge, which can challenge adults.

Generating and disseminating research findings to institute change: Adults' concerns about young researchers' protection and vulnerability can lessen their involvement in knowledge exchange – young researchers can and should be involved in safeguarding decisions and be made more aware of their research's impact at all levels. Child-led research can create new spaces for children and young people's views, experiences and perspectives to influence change – whether transforming attitudes and mindsets or changing policies and practices.

Navigating multifaceted relationships between adult facilitators and young researchers: While considered an unusual approach by the young researchers, to be deemed child-led research, the adult facilitator needed to support the project but not manage it. The emotional and social skills of the adult facilitators were crucial to the success of the child-led projects and at least as important as their technical skills. The young researchers felt supported, respected, loved and encouraged by their adult facilitators, and these relational aspects encouraged them to complete the projects.

Examining personal achievements of the young researchers: The young researchers perceived their participation in the child-led research to be a rewarding experience where they acquired new knowledge, skills and tools. The young researchers reported beneficial impacts on their lives, including an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence as they felt listened to and valued. They appreciated having a space where they could share and learn together with their peers, which increased their sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Child-led research, for this study, was not the equivalent of child-only research; it could involve adults in roles that facilitated the research, such as logistical and skill support and emotional labour to enable a constructive and motivating environment. This child-led research was like other effective participation activities, in that children and young people reported positive outcomes in skills development and self-confidence. Where it differed from participation activities were in its claims to knowledge generation and the expertise to do so. The young researchers argued that their unique perspectives and skills gave them a particular advantage over adult researchers in their ability to identify issues, improve fieldwork design and access, and analyse data. Their expertise was not only due to their lived experiences but, increasingly, through their skills development. This led to their ability to carry out the research thoroughly, reach a broad range of young people and generate forms of research knowledge. Child-led research, as an important contributor to knowledge generation, needs to face the challenges of the willingness for systems to change, conventions to be tested and shifting priorities. Child-led research is particularly challenging because it tests not only adults' decision-making but also adults' research attitudes and systems.

AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This briefing was written by Patricio Cuevas-Parra, Senior Policy Adviser, Child Participation and Rights, Advocacy and External Engagement, World Vision International, and E. Kay M. Tisdall, Professor of Childhood Policy, Childhood & Youth Studies Research Group, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh.

The authors would like to thank the generous contributions of children and young people who shared their time and thoughts in interviews and discussions.

© 2019 World Vision International