

# **Moving Beyond Voice in Children and Young People's Participation**

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## **Abstract**

This paper introduces research that challenges decision-makers to listen to and act upon children and young people's evidence. Participatory Action Research (PAR) processes in Nepal and the UK in which children and young people participated were revisited in order to gain stakeholder perceptions on whether children and young people's evidence was valued. The paper focuses on the Nepalese participatory action research case revisited, but draws on critical analysis across the cases including whether they led to positive change at individual, organisational and societal levels. When decision-makers reflected on the processes revisited, it was when they interacted with children and young people that they started to value their knowledge. It is suggested that participatory action research could incorporate mechanisms that confront intergenerational relationships and power dynamics to alter perceptions of children and young people's roles and their evidence. These are embedded into a 'Change-scape' framework that emerged from these revisits, that links children and young people agency to the wider context of social change. This helps incorporate age as integral to inclusion and to see children and young people as critical to participatory democracy so their views are taken seriously in decision-making affecting their lives. The mechanisms suggested to include children and young people in processes that lead to transformational change include: creating participatory spaces and building dialogue and trust between children and young people and adults in participatory action research.

## **Keywords**

Children, transformation, participation, power, context, socio-ecological theory

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## Introduction

### Is anybody listening?

In this paper I seek to answer the question: is anyone actually listening to children and young people's (CYP) evidence generated in participatory action research (PAR), and if not, what processes or mechanisms can help decision-makers to value their contributions? The analysis presented is based on revisits to PARs conducted in Nepal and the United Kingdom (UK) for government and non-governmental agencies that involved CYP's participation and were intended to influence decisions on service provision and allocation of resources. Primary research is presented predominantly from Nepal about the effectiveness of PAR processes in the different locations and specifically whether children's knowledge was valued and acted upon (or not) by people in positions of power. Part of the answer lies in an examination of different stakeholder attitudes towards CYP's involvement in participatory processes of action research. During a critical inquiry, different stakeholders, including CYP, reflected on: PAR processes in the different contexts; how evidence from CYP had been acted upon; and whether this had led to any changes in their lives, projects and communities. Reflexivity also includes considering how people in positions of power, who dominate decision-making in different institutional, political and cultural contexts, were included in processes of building relationships and trust with CYP. Also how this influenced the way in which the PAR processes 'worked': including the extent to which CYP's evidence from action research processes was taken seriously in decision-making processes and whether and how this led to transformational change on individual, organisational or societal levels.

From this analysis emerged a 'Change-scape' framework that is intended to help practitioners and decision-makers to analyse context more systematically and to plan mechanisms can be used in different global contexts to make the participation of CYP more meaningful. Through listening to CYP in PAR, the evidence from the ex post research that revisits cases in Nepal and the UK suggests that transformational change can be achieved not only at an individual level to improve CYP lives but also in terms of shifts in intergenerational dynamics and broader societal change. If power relationships between CYP and adult decision-makers are not taken into account in PAR, then CYP's evidence is likely to be ignored or used in a tokenistic way. Decisions are made on the basis of more quantitative evidence or from processes that are more adult centric. This also suggests a greater accountability for organisations to listen to the perspectives of CYP gathered in PARs in showing how they are taking into account the complexities of CYP lives and allowing the flexibility in their change processes to respond to their perspectives alongside those of other stakeholders in communities.

## An introduction to child rights and voice

For many years, decision-makers and practitioners have suggested that CYP's voices are important in an environment of rights-based research, intervention and evaluation. In response to the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), substantial progress has been made in terms of listening to the voices of CYP, particularly regarding Article 12 that specifies their right to express their opinions on issues that affect their lives (Van Beers, Invernizzi, & Milne, 2006). Child-focused organisations have been particularly active in raising the profile of CYP's voice and their right to participate. Despite a proliferation of coalitions and networks on child rights and many calls for their voice to be part of decision-making processes, it remains unclear to what extent evidence in the form of CYP's perspectives has informed provision of services and resource allocation. The key question remains: are children's voices and their evidence from PAR processes listened to or ignored?

Through the widespread ratification of the UNCRC, national legislation relating to children has also proliferated. Such legislation tends to focus on service provision to protect children, while legislative aspects to enhance their participation remain more elusive. Rights-based discourses have helped to shift perceptions of CYP towards that of active participants in development processes, rather than passive victims and recipients of care. Yet in practice their participation in action research, evaluation and decision-making has remained limited. Advocates and researchers within child-centred organisations have supported children's agency and their right to be heard, backed up by resource allocation supporting participatory initiatives in which children have been listened to and their perspectives acted upon. This has however, largely focused on marginalised groups, such as street connected and trafficked children or children in care (Johnson, Ivan-Smith, Gordon, Pridmore, & Scott, 1998). In broader international development programmes, CYP have remained at best poorly understood, at worst invisible and silent. Even where children's voices have been sought, their perspectives have often been ignored or sidelined in decision-making processes (Bartlett, 2005, Chawla & Johnson, 2004; Theis, 2010). Nevertheless, some examples exist of continued advocacy to further understand children's wellbeing as integral to a broader analysis of poverty, wellbeing and governance (e.g. Bartlett, 2001; Harper, Marcus, & Moore, 2003; Jones & Sumner, 2009; Williams, 2004).

As argued by Lundy (2007), we have to think beyond 'voice' and recognize that children will need space to express themselves and a receptive audience and this will only translate into influence if their voices are acted upon. Thus it is crucial to understand how support for children's agency in PAR can lead to transformational change and how specific features of context affect processes of PAR, and

ultimately outcomes for children. If voices and perspectives of CYP are ignored, then their participation rights are denied and well-intentioned development interventions can also have unintended negative impacts on their lives.

## Revisiting PAR processes

### About the revisited action research cases

The PARs that I revisited in Nepal and the UK were selected for differences in political, cultural, physical and institutional contexts and timeframes. These PAR processes were revisited to generate evidence about whether children's knowledge had influenced decision-making or led to transformational change. I had previously worked with Nepali researchers to understand the impact of rural integrated community development projects of a national NGO (1999–2001). In the UK, I undertook research with a colleague to review a scheme that supported youth peer-led programmes on inclusion, while in parallel training staff and young people to carry out PAR with peers in their youth-run programmes. Both elements of this action research were commissioned by the NGO that supported the programme (1999–2001). The third action research process took place in the multi-cultural Croydon suburb of London where a small team of researchers evaluated 19 programmes in statutory and non-governmental sectors providing children's services to 5 to 13 year olds as part of a Children's Fund Programme funded by the Government. One aspect of this evaluation was PAR on the impacts of projects on the lives of children. Both of the UK programmes focused on issues of inclusion such as disability, race and sexuality, and worked with children at risk of entering the criminal justice system or living in economically deprived locations.

In this article the focus is on the Nepalese case study. Despite this emphasis, revisiting PAR processes in the global South and North provided the opportunity to see how different cultural attitudes towards children's agency influenced perceptions.

In the PARs revisited, creative methods had been developed with stakeholders, including CYP, so that they felt comfortable analysing and presenting their perspectives. Anthropologists have long employed participatory visual methods as part of multi-method ethnographic approaches to understanding the lives of street and working children and as part of PAR processes (Nieuwenhuys, 1997; Reynolds, Nieuwenhuys, & Hanson, 2006). These methods, such as drawings, maps, friendship networks and diaries, also fall within the family of Participatory Appraisal (PA) approaches that were developed throughout the 1990s. The history of the development of these visual methods is well documented, including their use with CYP (Chawla & Johnson 2004; Johnson, 1996; Johnson et al., 1998).

In all three of the PARs, participatory methods were co-constructed and piloted by researchers with CYP, and then applied flexibly to suit the different contexts. This was an important part of the processes that could be regarded as carrying out research with rather than on CYP (as referred to by Mayall, 2000). However, none of the processes could be regarded as child-led where children design the research and act as lead researchers. Instead they were engaged as active participants using a range of participatory methods. The processes could also be regarded as rights-based (following Beazley & Ennew, 2006) in that different stakeholder perspectives were researched and ethical protocols were developed. Ethics protocols included consideration of child protection, informed consent from children as well as guardians/ carers, and other ethical issues relating to verification of findings with CYP and organising for them to be engaged in dialogue to present their analysis to staff and managers of interventions.

Visual participatory methods carried out with CYP included: drawing their lives before and after interventions and visioning to understand change; annotated mapping and preference ranking of interventions; diagrams of when in the project cycle they had been involved and how they had felt about this. Other participatory methods included: accompanying children as they were working; conducting moving interviews; role play of their roles and work in communities; and developing games, quizzes and presentations with CYP. These helped to analyse their key problems and solutions and to encourage dialogue with adults and decision-makers to discuss their priorities. The evidence generated by all of the stakeholders was analysed by the research teams with CYP, using a largely qualitative approach. For example, we compared the visuals and narratives generated by different groups of children (girls and boys of different ages, caste/ ethnicity and location), or from young people participating in different youth-run projects (Johnson and Nurick 2013).

In the high hill villages of Nawalparasi in the Mahabarat Mountains of Nepal, a team of Nepalese researchers worked using participatory visual approaches to understand the impact of community development interventions of the Himalayan Community Development Forum (HICODEF) (Johnson Sapkota, Sthapit, Ghimire, & Mahatu, 2001). Funded by the UK Department for International Development's (DfID) Innovation Fund and supported by ActionAid Nepal, this PAR was carried out as part of a programme 'Rights through Evaluation: Putting Child Rights into Practice in South Africa and Nepal' between 1999 and 2001. HICODEF were initially interested in CYP's perspectives as some of their income generation programmes had had unintended negative impacts, for example, girls leaving school to look after goats and children spending many hours every day collecting water and firewood. HICODEF were also interested in understanding what a rights-based approach meant for them in practice.

## The research methodology for the revisits

The methodology for the revisiting research was informed by ‘real world research’ (Robson, 2002) and critical realism (for example, Sayer, 2000). I selected a case study approach (following Stake, 2003) that encompassed both reflexivity and critical inquiry. This examines how specific features of context affected processes of CYP’s participation in action research and the mechanisms through which their evidence could be valued. As I had carried out the earlier PARs, I reflected on bias and my intimate knowledge of the contexts and processes. My previous involvement meant I also had access to the range of participants to interview for the critical inquiry. As two of the PARs revisited were conducted over a decade ago this was important, as it would otherwise have been difficult to find former participants. For the critical inquiry, I gathered evidence from a range of stakeholders to analyse alongside my own reflections. I revisited the action research sites and interviewed the participants (many now adults), staff from services and project workers, managers and commissioners who had been involved in the previous PARs. The revisits to conduct the critical inquiry took place during 2008–2009 (leading to Johnson, 2010, 2011).

My initial reflections on how the PARs fitted with theoretical perspectives in children’s participation and historical perspectives of rights-based approaches. Questions emerging from my reflection fed into the subsequent critical inquiry that explored stakeholder perceptions, including those of CYP, on the following issues: what conditions led to CYP’s evidence being valued; improvements in PAR processes; examples of change/ impact based on CYP’s input; and how policy context and cultural attitudes towards CYP affected the PARs and vice versa. Each interview included ranking scales and open-ended questions, and were completed with an open discussion about any other priorities from participants. My analysis included: detailed description of the cases, comparing perspectives for each PAR; themed analysis across the cases; and inductive theorising.

During the revisits, I considered how institutional, cultural and political contexts had influenced CYP’s participation. I identified change processes and mechanisms that led to decision-makers valuing CYP’s knowledge and informed action to improve their lives. The stakeholders interviewed provided their own definitions of transformational change at individual, organisational and societal levels.

In this paper, I have chosen to focus on three aspects. Firstly, I present a critical analysis of the PAR process as seen by different stakeholders and changes in Nepal resulting from CYP’s involvement in the PARs. Secondly, I focus on how

stake- holders value CYP's evidence and how they defined transformational change as a result of their involvement. Thirdly, I present the 'Change-scape' framework to suggest how context can be systematically taken into account when planning PARs to include CYP in a meaningful way, thus acknowledging their roles in democratic participation.

## The possibilities and power of PAR: Findings from the revisits

### Were CYP's perspectives valued and acted upon? An example of revisiting Nepal

During the revisit to Nepal, young adults who had been involved in the previous action research process as children examined pictures of themselves at the time and reflected on how they had been affected. I also carried out interviews with the Nepalese fieldworkers who had co-conducted the original research, staff from the local NGO, local decision-makers, and adults from the communities.

In one village, the young men and women felt that their evidence as children had not been listened to. Other major changes in the village, such as a road and electricity coming to the village, had influenced their lives in much more significant ways. On further analysis and reflection about why involving CYP had not led to memorable or significant changes in their lives. I came to the conclusion that issues of intergenerational relationships and the broader cultural context, including how CYPs were regarded in society, had not been considered deeply enough in designing the PARs. Involving CYP with engaging and analytic visuals had informed the local NGO in their development programmes across the villages. However, other conditions and aspects of PAR design also need to be considered in order to achieve broader transformational change and for children's evidence to be valued and listened to locally. This was done by analysing conditions in processes where participation of CYP had led to lasting change. For example, in another village, young people felt that the PAR process had led to changes in the interventions of the local NGO, and also to significant changes in their lives including the way that CYP began to be treated by adults in decision-making.

In this village, the young adults specifically remembered that their evidence as children had made a difference to collecting water. Water taps had been installed as part of the community development programme a decade earlier – although these taps had meant cleaner water, girls and boys had not been involved in planning the location or design of the taps, only in the hard labour constructing them. The taps were built too high for children to reach and they had to hang off them – yet collecting water was their household responsibility. Children came up with the ingenious solution of building steps up to the taps and now the

development agency always incorporates steps into its water programmes. ‘The child club has remained important in our village and is still strong and feeds into decisions made in our village.’ (Young man – former child leader of child club) The young adults also remembered changes at an individual level such as increased confidence and shifts in the way they spent their time from doing household chores to spending more time going to school. Young men and women noticed a sustained change in attitudes of adults towards children’s contributions to village decision-making. Children had previously been seen and not heard. In a cultural context where there is a gender preference to send boys to school while girls work in the house- hold, young girls started speaking out about issues that affected their lives and some of them had been able to attend school. In addition, despite feeling initially left out of the process as they could only speak the local language Magar, rather than Nepalese, the most marginalised children were included in discussions due to the efforts of NGO field staff to speak Magar.

A reason young men and women felt that they had had an impact on village- level decision-making was that one of the boys, now a journalist, inspired them in the local child club. Although at village level local government supports the formation of child clubs in Nepal, children and adults interviewed felt that this club functioned better by involving children in the PAR. It continued to function even through the period of conflict during Maoist insurgency. This particular boy acted as a ‘champion for children’ and helped CYP to organise and present their evidence. Adults in the village were convinced and saw positive changes as a result of suggestions from the child club. This club acted as a space where children and adults could communicate about issues affecting the children’s lives. This has led to a sustained change in the relationships between CYP and adults in the community and has meant that evidence generated by girls and boys in this village continues to be valued. This has, in turn, resulted in improved attendance at school for girls, better cleanliness and better access to water.

## Evidence of change in response to children’s participation across the action research cases

In the critical inquiry conducted during the revisit, in some situations CYP’s participation had not led to any positive changes (see the categories that emerged from the interviews about transformational change below). As mentioned above, in one of the villages where the PAR had been conducted in Nepal, CYPs interviewed during the revisit could hardly remember the process. The same was true in the UK where, even when CYP felt pleased to have contributed their evidence to the PARs, both CYP and managers said that decisions had been made on the basis of different evidence (see section below). This implies that the participation of CYP was tokenistic.

In those situations where children's knowledge had been valued, I identified the conditions under which decision-makers had listened to their ideas and opinions, and acted on their evidence. In these situations, where facilitated and supported by strategies that created participatory space and encouraged dialogue, CYP could be seen as agents of change making changes themselves and contributing and coordinating their valuable perspectives as evidence. When asked about examples of changes at an individual, organisational and societal level stakeholders provided examples that were grouped into the following five broad categories:

- . Increasing interest and confidence of CYP to participate in action research;
- . Changed attitudes of staff and managers to the value of children's perspectives;
- . Children's evidence informing and changing local projects and interventions;
- . New ways of working, structures and spaces for dialogue with CYP in institutions; and
- . Opportunities for dialogue with CYP and shifting power dynamics in households and communities. In Nepal details are provided relating to these different categories of change in the table below:

### Changing attitudes of managers and commissioners to participatory methods and CYP's evidence

One of the aspects that helps to move away from tokenistic participation of CYP is to confront attitudes of managers and commissioners towards the type of evidence they value in decision-making and their commitment to change in response to perspectives of CYP. In the revisits I examined these attitudes. In Nepal one of the key issues that was raised by staff and managers was the capacity to respond to CYP's perspectives and to realise child rights at local and national levels. Understanding the politics in which PAR processes are conducted was seen as critical to making CYP's participation meaningful and encouraging decision-makers in government and NGOs to become more accountable in listening to the voices of CYP. One of the managers interviewed talked about how CYP should not be separated out, but seen as integral to broader inclusive approaches to participatory democracy and inclusion:

Despite 'inclusion' being a buzz word all over Nepal over the last ten years, 'Inclusive Nepal' addresses caste/ethnicity and gender, but children seem to be separated out, rather than included. Issues of Child Rights should be cross-

cutting like other issues of inclusion. Now even religion, the geopolitical location of people (for example, Madhesi – people from the Terai) and whether people are of different indigenous grouping (for example, Magar, Tamang, Gorkhas, Gurung, Rai, Limbu) or of different caste (for example, Dalit) are all aspects included in discussions of inclusion, but still not age, which should go alongside gender as cross-cutting. (Manager)

Interviews also revealed that, since 2000, commissioners of research and evaluation were requesting more quantitative evidence. Despite PAR gaining acceptance in the late 1990s and early 2000s, NGO managers and staff who felt that they had previously been given space for ‘other ways of knowing’, now felt under more pressure to deliver ‘hard outcomes’, largely quantitative. Some of the managers and staff, especially those from the government/ statutory regarded quantitative evidence as most useful to decision-making processes. They were often only convinced of the value of children’s qualitative evidence from PARs if this was accompanied by some quantitative monitoring data or the use of mixed methods for research (as also suggested by Jones & Sumner, 2009). Some of the managers interviewed suggested that the most acceptable qualitative evidence was more structured and might include longitudinal case studies and proxy indicators. Without due attention to mechanisms that engage with decision-makers, attitudes to children’s evidence and involving them in PAR can seem tokenistic. This was true of PARs in both global North and South.

Findings from the critical inquiry revealed that some managers and commissioners of the PARs were still sceptical about whether children’s participatory evidence provided a firm enough basis on which to make decisions about resource allocation. There were examples of decision-makers who regarded participatory approaches as effective in understanding the complexities of children’s lives. Other managers had changed their views, gradually becoming convinced that participatory methods with CYP could produce rigorous and valuable evidence. Changing attitudes towards children’s evidence were due both to a growing awareness in the international community about the importance of children’s participation, and to mechanisms in the PARs that built trust, and improved relationships and dialogue between CYP and adults.

‘Gradually the awareness is growing in the global community about the valuable input that children can make and people can no longer deny the importance of their participation.’ (NGO Member of Staff)

Many managers and commissioners interviewed could see benefits of PAR in terms of transformational change. This was by changing their own or institutional attitudes towards children’s evidence, or by changing relationships and communication between children and adults (see ‘Introduction’ section and Table 1 on outcomes/changes from PAR in Nepal). Managers interviewed, however, still

referred to these changes as ‘spin-offs’ rather than seeing them as integral to the PAR processes. Thus, transformational changes at individual, institutional and broader societal levels need to be more strategically and systematically recognised as outcomes of PARs with CYP. Mechanisms that enable and support these changes can then be built into action research and evaluation. Institutional, cultural and political context also need to be understood in order to design appropriate ways to engage with CYP. These mechanisms are further discussed in ‘Change-scape’ framework section below.

Table 1. Change as a result of involving children and young people in action research processes revisited.

	Nepalese case study
Changing confidence of CYP	Some boys involved started to wash dishes and eat together with girls in the household. Girls said that they felt more confident to speak out especially when their local ‘Magar’ language was used instead of Nepalese.
Changing attitudes of staff and managers	Increased sensitivity in broader development planning in HICODEF and other organisations where project staff now work, for example consulting with children on planning village level interventions. Skills involving children have been used in the Safer Motherhood Programme in Nepal.
Children and young people’s evidence changing projects	Previously taps were built so children could not reach them. Steps were built up to the water taps so that children could fulfill their household responsibility to collect water.
New ways of working, structures, spaces	Programmes to ‘enhance partner capacity’, for example in ActionAid Nepal this involves using participatory methodologies with all groups, including children. In HICODEF it involves working with child clubs and having more analysis of gender and generation across programmes.
More dialogue with children and shifting intergenerational dynamics	Active child clubs in some villages where adults have started to take children’s perspectives seriously. This is often catalysed by a local ‘champion for children’ in the community that can be a child or an adult. They can help to facilitate intergenerational dialogue that begins to shift perceptions of the roles of girls and boys and how their evidence is valued.

## Change-scape: Mechanisms for valuing children’s knowledge and

## transformational change

The last section presented the potential to achieve positive outcomes. A basis on which to suggest that there is a positive rationale for engaging CYP in PAR. This section suggests a more systematic way to design PAR to be more child or youth centred so that age is an integral part of inclusion and participatory democratic processes. It is evident that it is insufficient to only consider engaging CYP with innovative participatory methods, but that PAR processes need to also address intergenerational relationships and power dynamics between children and adult decision-makers in different political, cultural and institutional contexts (Johnson 2014). The ‘Change-scape’ framework that is presented provides a way to systematically consider how CYP could be more meaningfully involved in PAR. It takes into account CYP agency and developing identities, but links them to adults in communities and decision-makers in broader political and cultural contexts. Mechanisms are described that were identified from the analysis across PAR cases of conditions that led to positive transformational change as defined by participants. These mechanisms of communication and collaboration confront intergenerational relationships and power dynamics in these contexts so that decision-makers become more sensitive and aware of the value of CYP participation.

The ‘Change-scape’ presented is informed by critical realism (for example, Sayer, 2000) and by recent socio- and cultural-ecological theories (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge, 2008) that prioritise context and help to identify mechanisms that translate action into outcomes for CYP (Johnson, 2010, 2011). The diagram that represents this ‘Change-scape’ framework has been developed through its application in PARs and youth led research in international NGOs. For example, in research across Africa, Asia and Latin America a modified ‘change-scape’ has been used to help International Planned Parenthood Federation and member organisations to become child or youth centred and thus to become more accountable in listening to CYP in PAR (for example Johnson & Braeken, 2015; Johnson, Leach, Beardon, Covey, & Miskelly, 2013). [AQ1] Learning about how to employ strategies to address power dynamics in PAR and child centred processes has also applied in research with street-connected children in Nairobi about their journeys to the street and into education (Johnson, Johnson, Magati, & Walker, 2016).

The diagram of the ‘Change-scape’ below has therefore been further modified to take into account the more dynamic nature of the links between CYP, PAR processes, different aspects of context, place and space and time (following Bronfenbrenner’s later writing on socio-ecological theory 2005). The strategies link CYP to their contexts and help to address power dynamics pervading the spaces and places that CYP inhabit have also been reconsidered in this version of

the ‘Change-scape’ framework (building on the notions of context and mechanisms in critical realism e.g. in Robson, 2002). Particularly relevant to this framework is the bidirectional link between children and their context: CYP influence and change their context, and vice versa. This fits with CYP being considered and respected as agents of change (Figure 1).

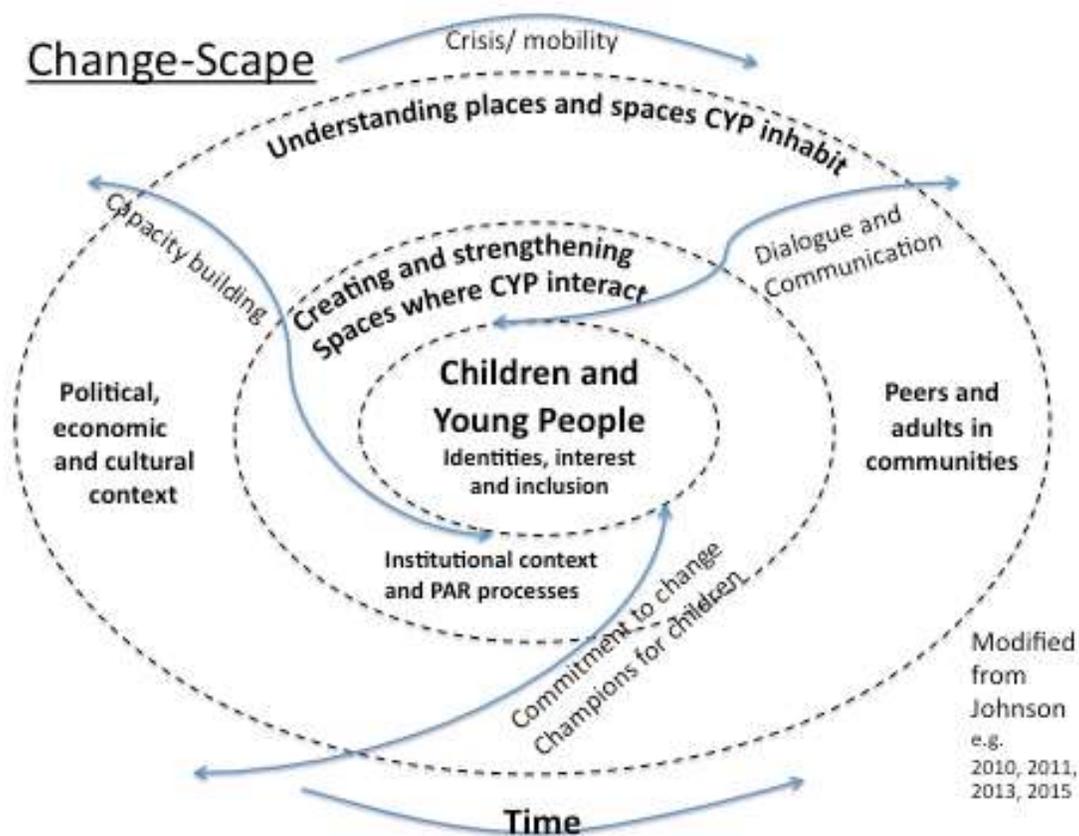


Figure 1. The ‘Change-scape’ framework.

The Change-scape stratifies context, informed by Burawoy’s (2003) framework of revisits and by the layered stratification of context in critical realism (Sayer, 2000). This stratification of context is crucial in that steps to realising child rights need to be culturally sensitive rather than imposed from a ‘western’ or ‘northern’ perspective. Thus, it highlights the importance of understanding political, cultural and physical context, including beliefs and attitudes towards childhood and children, and also the relational power dynamics with peers and adults in communities. This systematic analysis of context and power is central to designing PAR processes that make CYP’s involvement more meaningful. Also critical to analyzing context are the aspects associated with the institutional context and the PAR itself. This includes understanding the institutional context in

which the PAR is commissioned and implemented, the politics of the acceptance of CYP's evidence, the commitment to change in response to their views, and the capacity of different players and whether they act as champions for children.

This 'Change-scape' or landscape of change needs to be understood historically and re-considered at different time periods as action research processes develop. Aspects of crisis in political or environmental context, for example, or in family/CYP's lives are cross cutting and PAR processes need to take into account CYP's mobilities both within their local contexts and in migrating to live and work in other places.

The last aspect of the 'Change-scape' framework concerns how strategies can be incorporated into PAR design and implementation that link CYP's agency to context. This includes consideration of the spaces and places in which CYP interact and inhabit, and the other mechanisms or strategies in PARs that can address the power dynamics.

Creation and strengthening of participatory spaces can allow children to express themselves and to interact with other children, adults and decision-makers: these people may end up being their audiences and are in different positions to influence change. An example of this from the revisits was the strengthening of the child club in one of the villages in the Nepal case study so children built their confidence to communicate their evidence to adults in the village. Another example was to hold participatory training, reflection and evaluation sessions throughout PAR with different stakeholders to assess CYP's participation and establish whether anyone was actually listening to their views. This emphasis on the creation of participatory spaces where CYP can build their confidence and communication with each other and adults in communities was also central to international research with youth on their sexual rights (Johnson et al., 2013). On the 'Change-scape' diagram, the spaces surround the CYP are represented by a dotted line indicating that PARs can create and extend participatory spaces for CYPs (following ideas on the importance of participatory space, e.g. Cornwall, 2004; Kesby, 2005). Also represented by a dotted line are the places that CYP inhabit acknowledging that these may expand or change with CYP's changing identities, sense of belonging and mobility / migration that need to be understood in the context of their complex lives (e.g. Johnson et al., forthcoming).

Three bidirectional arrows on the diagram represent key mechanisms that influence valuing of CYP's evidence in PAR were identified. Examples of what this looked like in practice are taken from the Nepalese case revisited.

1. Capacity building both with CYP to build their confidence and with commissioners and managers to understand participatory evidence and to engender an appreciation of children's knowledge. In Nepal National and Local

level 'Reference Groups' were set up to include decision-makers from academia, government and non-government organisations. This provided a forum to critically discuss the PARs including the way in which CYP had been involved and the value of their evidence. Such forums can also provide a space for dialogue between different stakeholders including CYP.

2. Dialogue and communication using different forms of media can help shift relationships and attitudes of different stakeholders towards CYP and their evidence. In the revisits it was established that this led in some cases to broader and longer-term shifts where adults started to listen to CYP. In Nepal many visual participatory methods were used to present CYP's analysis to adults. These visuals helped build the children's confidence in expressing what they felt needed changing in interventions in the broader community. Songs and diaries about the daily lives and work of CYP were also effective.

3. Commitment to change and identifying champions for children can establish from the beginning of a PAR whether there will be flexibility to respond to CYP's evidence and to continue to support their involvement. Establishing what commitment there is to change can mean understanding different and sometimes conflicting 'Theories of Change' and expectations in terms of the politics of evidence. One example is the ongoing dedication of Nepali researchers to work in remote rural communities throughout periods of conflict to ensure that CYP's perspectives continued to be heard in conditions of adversity. Champions for children can help to motivate different stakeholders and make processes more sustainable. For example, in one of the villages revisited in Nepal, a young boy organised his peers to present their evidence to adults in communities. In the longer-term adults continued to value the perspectives of the child club.

Context strongly influences how these mechanisms interact and work. The key is to engage with CYP and adults who are producing and receiving evidence during PAR; also to ensure that these mechanisms confront and address existing intra and intergenerational power relationships in communities and organisations. Changing attitudes towards CYP in PAR includes understanding hierarchies of evidence in local and national policy decision-making. In this way, relationships can start to change so that children's evidence is respected and used in decision-making (also see Johnson, 2015).

## **Conclusions: Building on PAR that values CYP's knowledge**

In this paper I sought to illustrate how CYP's participation can avoid tokenism and be more meaningful, so their voices are heard by decision-makers and their evidence is valued as part of more transformative development processes. Changes as a result of PAR with CYP need to be understood within the broader

theories of change of organisations working with children, young people and their families. Calls for new theories of children's participation internationally (Tisdall, Davis, Prout, & Hill, 2006) accompanied by better defined PAR in local and national contexts, can lead to governments and those with responsibilities towards children becoming more accountable for how they respond to children's opinions through changes in policies and legislation (as advocated by Lansdown, 2010).

Stakeholders will have different starting points in terms of valuing children's knowledge, hence strategies for gathering evidence need to be considered in each context. There are competing pressures and expectations for different forms of evidence: mixed methods can achieve buy-in to involve CYP at the start of the process. Some decision-makers may never believe that children have the capability to contribute to planning and evaluating interventions and services, or that their evidence can inform resource allocation. In the global North there is increasing pressure for quantitative evidence and, despite the rhetoric of rights, children's participation can still be seen as a tick box exercise. In the global South, despite many children contributing significantly to household and community economies, children are still often seen and not heard, or child rights seen as a threat to traditional cultures and power dynamics. Development aid and interventions often focus on child protection and provision of services rather than on their participation. In this research, however, some stakeholders, although at first skeptical of the value of children's knowledge, became increasingly convinced of CYP's participation as they saw it working in the child/youth focused PAR processes. Treating CYP as active participants and using engaging methods helped to create better communication between CYP and adult decision-makers. Capacity building of staff and children in working in more participatory and engaging research, providing participatory spaces where CYP felt comfortable to develop and communicate their evidence, and encouraging dialogue between staff, managers and commissioners and CYP helped to shift perceptions of children's roles in PAR and as agents of change.

The emphasis on participatory spaces and dialogue is supported by theories on children's participation (Lundy, 2007), encouraging spaces for dialogue in youth participation (Percy-Smith, 2006) and for intergenerational performance and interaction (Mannion, 2010). It also aligns with broader discourses in international development, geography and participation that argue for the creation of participatory spaces (for example, Cornwall, 2004; Kesby, 2005). CYP may need to learn to express themselves in participatory spaces, which may mean finding them in-situ rather than inviting them into adult-dominated spaces or newly created structures divorced from everyday rhythms. If the evidence from more marginalised CYP is taken into account in decision-making then researchers need go out to spaces where children feel comfortable (as also suggested by White & Choudhury, 2007). By actively engaging in dialogue in spaces where CYP feel

comfortable and using methods that they can relate to, their evidence can reflect their realities and help us to understand the complexity of the links between research, practice and policy (also advocated by Morton, 2014 and Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007).

To facilitate greater impact in PAR, stakeholders in action research, including CYP, can be engaged actively in processes that are emergent or adapted depending on policy and practice settings (Morton, 2014). Children's participation supported at different levels of governance can only then influence decision-making forums with support modified depending on political systems and local capacities (Theis, 2010). The landscape of change will therefore need to be understood and revisited over time throughout a process of action research and beyond. To achieve more transformational development including changes that CYP themselves see as important in realising their rights, we will need to continue to establish whether CYP's knowledge has been respected and valued or not. Within PAR processes there can also be further development of mechanisms that engage CYP in and shift adult perceptions of their roles and decision-makers valuing their evidence.

In conclusion, when CYP are included in PAR in a meaningful way there can be positive transformational changes to their lives and in turn to their contexts. As we have seen in examples from the revisit to Nepal, shifting adult attitudes towards the value of CYP's inclusion in democratic participation and of their evidence in decision-making can be achieved through: capacity building with children and decision-makers; creating spaces where children feel comfortable and safe; encouraging dialogue between adults and children; being accountable and having a commitment to change in response to their evidence; and supporting champions for children. This article provides new knowledge that can help to contribute to making PAR processes more child and youth centred so that their voices are heard when shaping services and policies to improve their lives. This will only happen however when children are not treated as a separate group in PAR, but as integral to PARs in communities and as agents of change in participatory democracy in a broader political and cultural context.

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