

# Spaces for the children of the urban poor: experiences with participatory action research (PAR)

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**SUMMARY:** *This paper explains why participatory action research (PAR) could be so important in helping the children of the urban poor, and those who work with them, generate relevant insights into their specific needs and priorities and help them influence decisions that are taken about their lives. The paper begins by discussing the problems facing children in urban areas of the South and why more participatory research approaches which work with children have come to the fore. It then describes what participatory action research is (and is not) and why researchers and the institutions that fund them have difficulty in supporting such a research approach, especially in relation to children. The paper then addresses the three main implications for researchers who want to use PAR with children: taking responsibility for the children's needs and priorities within the research; balancing participation and mediation; and ensuring the research helps to negotiate more spaces for children in their environment and more power in their relationship with the state and society.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

"I started working in one house, then slowly more and more people approached me. In the beginning I used to get very tired but now I am used to it. I have brought my mother a rack for keeping utensils. Whenever my parents go out of town I give them money to buy me things I need. I like school and so I attend classes at night. I like to play also. I don't mind working...I have got used to it but it would be nice to study so that I can get a proper job as a tailor."

"I have experienced a lot by staying on the streets. I know the problems there. I know that I have been denied the rights a child is supposed to have - the right to shelter, to education, etc. We do not even have a ration card, which is our right, our identity. We have a right to live with dignity

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1. The testimonies were collected by Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) in Bombay and published in *Children in Action, A Newsletter for Street Educators on Action Research* (1996) No.2, published jointly by IRIS (Interlink Rural Information Services) in Nairobi and InDRA. Enquiries and free copies can be obtained through the author.

2. See Wyness, M.G. (1996), "Policy, protectionism and the competent child", *Childhood, A Global Journal of Child Research* Vol.3, No.4, pages 431-447 for a discussion.

3. This can be gauged by a number of recent workshops and publications on a subject on which very little has been written until now. See, for instance, ENDA-Zimbabwe (1993), *Children's Participation in Action Research*, Training Course for Trainers, ENDA, Harare; also ENDA (1995), *Enfants en Recherche et en Action, Une Alternative Africaine d'Animation Urbaine*, ENDA-Editions, Dakar; Nieuwenhuys, Olga (editor) (1995), *Drafting an Action Research Curriculum for Street Educators, Workshop Report*, University of Amsterdam Institute for Development Research, Amsterdam; Connolly, Mark and Judith Ennew (1996), "Introduction: children out of place", *Childhood, Children out of Place: Special Issue on Working and Street Children* Vol.3, No.2, May, pages 131-146; Johnson, Victoria, J. Hill and E. Ivan-Smith, (1995), *Listening to Smaller Voices: Children in an Environment of Change*, ActionAid, London; Bemak, Fred (1996), "Street researchers: a new paradigm redefining future research with street children", *Childhood, Children out of Place:*

in society. We do not get any of these rights. Society thinks we are dirty. When will we get these rights? When will society recognize us?"

"Living in the streets, one always fears being picked up by the police and being locked up. There are no facilities to store our belongings, our savings, no bathing facilities. But there is freedom, and openness. We obtain these facilities in the centre but there we have to follow the rules of the centre. I stay in a separate room, and experience a lot of freedom. In addition there is also a sense of responsibility - the rent has to be paid and household expenses met."

**THESE ARE TESTIMONIES** from boys living in one of the world's largest cities, Bombay.<sup>(1)</sup> But they could be from any other city in the South. Theirs is an accusation against an urban society that not only fails to provide children with their most elementary entitlements but also violates their civil rights precisely because they are children. That these testimonies have been collected and published signals however that something is happening at the level of urban society that recognizes the strength and creativity of poor children and, at the same time, questions policies that define them as being in need of protection, control and redevelopment.

The poverty of children in the cities of the South has recently drawn attention to the urgency of developing participative methods that respect and strengthen these children's mechanisms of survival. City authorities are now increasingly prompting NGOs to devise creative responses that can be accommodated within the margins of modest outlays. Recent debates about children's rights, and most notably children's role in the realization of these rights, have prepared the ground for NGOs' inclination to extend the notion of grassroots to the children of the poor. Their approach to children's issues has hereby undoubtedly been influenced by pedagogy and social work theory with its recurrent insistence upon the agency of children.<sup>(2)</sup> These factors have contributed to a growing interest in developing participatory action research (PAR) methods that can be used with children.<sup>(3)</sup>

There is a danger, however, that the eagerness to find fast and low-cost solutions means that any kind of intervention that does not entirely exclude the possibility of consulting children is described as PAR. Obviously, there is a world of difference between intended and actual participation, and this is particularly true of PAR. This does not, however, mean that PAR with children should be set aside as one of the many promises of redemption that litter the path of development.<sup>(4)</sup> As it stands, the method presupposes a fairly high capacity for independent thinking and collective action, something more likely to be found in cooperatives or sections of local unions if they are well-organized and have members with intellectual potential. Poor children in cities have generally not been attributed these qualities. These children, particularly those prominent in the streets, are, however, as evidenced by a number of researchers, much

*Special Issue on Working and Street Children Vol.3, No.2, May, pages 147-156*; Hart, R.A. (1995), "Children as the makers of a new geography" in Karsten, L. (editor) (1995), "Building identities, gender perspectives on children and urban space", concluding report of the International Conference, Amsterdam, 11-13 April; Heng Keng, C. (1994), "Policy makers and practitioners as action researchers", working paper for the RTRC Regional Conference on Children of Urban Families, Singapore, 5-9 September; and Kefyalew, Firew (1996), "The reality of child participation in research: experience from a capacity building programme" in *Childhood, Children out of Place: Special Issue on Working and Street Children Vol.3, No.2, May, pages 203-214*.

4. For a critical history of "development" as a set of rituals and beliefs inscribed in the western tradition see Rist, Gilbert (1996), *Le Développement, Histoire d'une Croyance Occidentale*, Presses de Sciences Po:Paris (ZED:London, forthcoming).

5. Aptekan, Lewis (1988), *Street Children of Cali*, Duke University Press:Durham and London; Felsman, Kirk (1989), "Risk and Resiliency in Childhood: the lives of street children" in Dugan, T.F. and R. Coles, *The Child in our Times, Studies in the Development of Resiliency*, Brunner/Mazel:New York, pages 56-80; Ward, Colin (1990), *The Child in the City*, Bedford Square Press:London; and Connolly, Mark (1990), "Adrift in the city: a comparative study of street children in Bogotá, Colombia and Guatemala City" in Boxill, N.A. (editor) (1990), *Homeless Children: The Watchers and the Waiters*, The Haworth Press: New York and London, pages 129-149.

6. Many of the ideas presented in this paper were developed collectively during a two-week workshop held at InDRA in June 1994, by Ferry de los Angeles Bautista, Jo Boyden, Almaz Eshete, Fulvia

more active in negotiating their legitimate place in the urban environment than popularly believed.<sup>(5)</sup> As I will contend in this article, PAR not only has the potential for generating relevant insights into children's needs but it is also essential for understanding how the contradictions between real and ideal childhoods are being resolved. In this paper, I will discuss the problems facing childhood in Southern cities, and what I mean by PAR and then address its three main implications with respect to children, namely taking responsibility, balancing participation with mediation and contesting spaces for children's agency.<sup>(6)</sup> I will argue that PAR can help children, and those who work with them, to build their everyday experiences into knowledge thus enabling them to influence decisions that are taken about their lives.

## II. CHILD WELFARE IN SOUTHERN CITIES

**THERE ARE VARIOUS** factors that favour the involvement of poor children in research: budgetary constraints, the lack of specialist knowledge, and political concern arising from public unfamiliarity with the situation of poor children are the most notable.

First, budgetary constraints, and most saliently the cuts imposed through structural adjustment programmes, weigh particularly heavily on social spending for education, public health and food, and have, over the past decade, caused a marked decrease in the standard of living of children in general.<sup>(7)</sup> The cuts not only worsened conditions in the countryside but also limited the funds available for new services and facilities for the fast growing urban population of children. Many city authorities now face the problem of having insufficient funding for schools, day care facilities, housing schemes, clinics, playgrounds, etc. in the sprawling new urban settlements.

Facing the need to choose among the provision of services which, at first, seem all equally necessary to guarantee a minimum standard of life to children, governments increasingly question the applicability of Northern ideals of childhood. This ideal is grounded in a vision of childhood happiness as a matter of public concern and requiring the vast array of institutions, services and specialist knowledge typical of industrial societies. In contrast, Southern childhood has been consistently represented as the illustration of all that a lack of development would entail in terms of cruelty to children. Child marriages, infanticide, child labour, child abandonment, child prostitution, child soldiers, are all too familiar representations that have invaded discourses on childhood in the South.<sup>(8)</sup> In a climate that is so fundamentally pessimistic about the future of children in the South, it is no easy task to recuperate childhood's integrity without lapsing into self-defeating cultural relativism. Encouraging a more positive approach to the children of the poor, one that respects their integrity and upholds the often precious mechanisms of survival on which their livelihoods depend, is one way of addressing this problem.<sup>(9)</sup> The most outstanding

Marquez, Dorothy Muniyako, Sarah Oloko, Pamela Reynolds, Henk van Beers, Madeleine Vreeburg and myself. For a full report, see Nieuwenhuys (1995) in reference 3. I am indebted to Reineke Schermer for the bibliographical searches at the libraries of the University of Amsterdam and the Royal Tropical Institute of the Netherlands that helped me in writing this article. Corrie Wessendorp and Esther van den Berg kindly assisted in the compilation.

7. Cornia, G., Richard Jolly and Frances Stewart (editors) (1987), *Adjustment with a Human Face, Volume I: Protecting the Vulnerable and Promoting Growth, a Study by UNICEF*, Clarendon Press: Oxford; also Cornia, G., Richard Jolly and Frances Stewart (editors) (1988), *Adjustment with a Human Face, Volume II: Country Case Studies*, Clarendon Press: Oxford; and Graham-Brown, S. (1991), *Education in the Developing World, Conflict and Crisis*, Longman: London and New York.

8. Burman, Erica (1996), "Local, global or globalized? Child development and international child rights legislation", *Childhood Vol.3, pages 45-66*; also Nieuwenhuys, Olga, (1996), "Global childhood and the politics of contempt", paper for the VIIIth General EADI Conference on Globalisation, Competitiveness and Human Security, Vienna (Austria), 11-14 September.

9. Boyden, Jo (1990), "Childhood and the policy makers: a comparative perspective on the globalization of childhood" in James, A. and A. Prout (editors) (1990), *Constructing and Deconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, Falmer: Basingstoke, Hants.; also reference 8, Burman (1996) and Nieuwenhuys (1996).

10. For a recent discussion of the state of the art, see reference 3, the article by Connolly and Ennew (1996).

example of this is the introduction, in 1986, of new child labour legislation in India that recognized the importance of work for poor children and their families. Non-formal education, likewise, has increasingly been seen as a sensible alternative to formal schooling in countries as disparate as Peru, Kenya, Zaire, Pakistan and India. As a justification, Southern authorities argue that to provide working children with formal schools can be futile if their main concern is to combine school with work and obtain skills training. Also, institutionalization of homeless children has come under attack because it would deny that many children value their freedom and that their main problem is public contempt and police violence. As an alternative, a growing number of NGOs have been training the police to respect children's citizens' rights. In short, the time when dogooders could feel confident that their intuitive knowledge of children's best interests provided sufficient inspiration for interventions seems to be gone for good.

However, and this brings me to the second point, specialist knowledge to help develop and improve informal school curricula, to set up day-care centres, to address the situation of working children and out-of-school youth etc., is, in a situation where there is great pressure on resources, even more critically lacking.<sup>(10)</sup> Institutions that impart this type of knowledge are, in many countries, either non-existent or hardly up to the task of providing professionals with the necessary frame of mind and creative skills. Where career prospects are frustrated by budgetary constraints, there is bound to be little incentive for young intellectuals to devote their talents to poor children's needs. This is even the case for those who find a calling in this type of work or who are particularly dutiful, such as many social workers and school teachers. They may find it hard to develop their professional skills in the absence of sufficient response from an academic community that has traditionally been little interested in the issue of children's poverty. Still very much imbued with Northern paradigms of child development, this community has lacked both the motivation and the means to provide insights into the modalities of childhood in the South.

Thirdly, the consequences of this lack of services for poor children manifest themselves in a perceived increased presence of children on the streets which has become a source of public anxiety. Although the factors causing this anxiety are not yet fully understood, their relation to a more general awareness that the state is failing in its mission to address and control social tensions is evident. Thus, children's participation in developing local responses to their most urgent needs situates itself in a social and political climate where the various actors involved in child welfare are receptive to the idea that they need feedback from children if they want to come up with the kind of innovative and low-cost interventions that the situation in cities seems to be calling for urgently.

It is important, in this connection, to bear in mind that the reason why conventional research is felt to be inopportune is not only because it is costly and time-consuming both in terms of generating results and of the structure it requires for imple-

11. Pratt, Brian, and P. Loizos, (1992), *Choosing Research Methods, Data Collection for Development Workers*, Development Guidelines 7, OXFAM:Oxford; also Schrijvers J. (1992), *The Violence of "Development": A Choice for Intellectuals*, Inaugural Speech, International Books and Kali for Women:Utrecht and New Delhi.

12. Edwards, Michael (1996), "Institutionalising children's participation in development" in *PLA Notes, Special Issue on Children's Participation* No.25, pages 47-51.

13. Johnson, Victoria (1996), "Starting a dialogue on children's participation" in *PLA Notes, Special Issue on Children's Participation* No.25, pages 30-35.

14. For a useful guide on policy oriented research, see Ennew, J., (1994), *Street and Working Children: A Guide to Planning*, Save the Children, Development Manual 4, London.

15. See, for example, Reynolds, P. (1990), *Dance Civet Cat: Child Labour in the Zambezi Valley*, ZED:London; and Nieuwenhuys, O. (1994), *Children's Lifeworlds, Labour, Gender and Welfare in the Developing World*, Routledge: New York and London.

16. See reference 11, Schrijvers (1992), page 40.

17. Rahman, M.A., (1993), *People's Self-development. Perspectives on Participatory Action Research: A Journey through Experience*, ZED:London and New Jersey and University Press:Dhaka, page 82.

18. See reference 17, page 83.

mentation. In some countries, where conventional research has relied on expatriate knowledge, with the risk that this might result in lines of action that estrange the children from their urban environment, the choice of PAR is also borne out of the awareness that conventional methods are intrusive and distanced, and engender "top-down" types of intervention.<sup>(11)</sup> Both NGOs and local authorities in these countries seek in PAR a methodology that, over the past two decades, has been successful in supporting development interventions in close collaboration with their beneficiaries.<sup>(12)</sup> The choice for PAR is hence often the expression of a desire to obtain reliable data on which to base policy decisions in a way that is both fast, cheap and adapted to local conditions.<sup>(13)</sup> The question of whether PAR is indeed the alternative to conventional research which it is held out to be for addressing the issue of child welfare in the South will be examined at the end of this paper. But, first, let us clarify the meaning of PAR.

### III. PARTICIPATIVE ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)

**AS FOR ALL** popular terms, the notion of participative action research has recently been used to designate all kinds of research activity that, to some extent, do not suit the classical paradigm of value-free, positivistic research. In particular, it has been ill-used in cases where the intended beneficiaries have been consulted by the researcher, or enrolled at some stage of the data-gathering, but where this consultation has not led to a genuine sharing of power at the decision-making level. This type of research is more correctly referred to as "policy oriented" and is not the subject of this article.<sup>(14)</sup> Neither is this article about the anthropological, actor oriented type of research that recognizes the unique, inventive and constantly creative individuals who influence their own lives and the social structures in which they are embedded, but which reveals no partiality for a bottom-up perspective.<sup>(15)</sup> As remarked by Schrijvers, this type of research fails to make room for committed researchers who are themselves intellectual mediators in this process of transforming society.<sup>(16)</sup>

For Rahman, PAR is a type of research whose basic proposition is:

"...the ideology that...those who are currently poor and oppressed will progressively transform their environment by their own praxis. In this process others may play a catalytic or supportive role, but will not dominate."<sup>(17)</sup>

Another distinctive feature of PAR is the belief that social oppression is not only rooted in material conditions but also in the means of knowledge production. It is only when the people concerned develop their own processes for generating knowledge and acquire the means of asserting this knowledge *vis-à-vis* the knowledge of the dominant class that they can challenge their oppression on a durable basis.<sup>(18)</sup> Although this

19. See reference 11, Pratt and Loizos (1992), page 9.

20. This is the reason, I believe, why so few social anthropologists and sociologists have approached children as informants or made their lives the focus of research.

21. See reference 5, Aptekan (1988); also Baker, Rachel with Catherine Panter-Brick and Alison Todd (1996), "PRA with children in Nepal", *Childhood, Children out of Place: Special Issue on Working and Street Children* Vol.III, No.2, May, page 178.

22. For a discussion of the literature on the girl child, see Van Beers, Henk (1994), *In Search of the Girl, A Critical Review of the Literature on Girlhood in the South*, Occasional Paper No.2, Institute for Development Research, Amsterdam (InDRA) who criticizes the tendency of social scientists to overemphasize the importance of girls' sexual roles in explaining mechanisms of subordination.

23. See, for example, Penna Firme T., V.I. Stone and J.A. Tijiboy (1991), "The generation and observation of evaluation indicators of the psychosocial development of participants in programmes for street children in Brazil" in Myers, W.E. (editor) (1991), *Protecting Working Children*, ZED:London; see also reference 14, Ennew (1994); reference 13, Johnson (1996); and Narayaswamy, N., B.R. Dwaraki, B. Tamilmani and R. Ramesh (1996), "Whither children's hour? An experimental PRA among labouring rural children" in *PLA Notes* No.25, February, IIED:London, pages 65-69.

sounds very grand, and requires in fact the support of a sustained revolutionary mass movement, Rahman is careful to specify that even micro-level experiments within restricted spaces can help develop this type of self-reliant knowledge. This has undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of this approach among committed intellectuals and activists from voluntary organizations and NGOs who are trying to include an element of strong consultation and involvement by the intended beneficiaries of interventions.

However, this does not mean that all the experiments with PAR have contributed towards generating, as remarked by Pratt and Loizos, a distinct set of self-contained methods.<sup>(19)</sup> The reason is that existing methods work from a subject (the researcher) - object (the researched) relationship, in which the researched is assigned a role of passivity and incompetence. If it wants to undermine what is essentially a power relation in the production of knowledge, PAR must address the problem that active participation by the researched is bound to impinge on the scope for independent reflection and analysis of the researcher. This precludes the elaboration of a formal set of methods which would form another limitation to the subjective construction of knowledge.

It is precisely this need to relinquish power that is the problem with PAR involving children. Power attached to recognized expertise becomes even more difficult to ignore in situations where systems of gender and seniority assign to those who are to be the subjects of research a state of innate immaturity and inferiority. Even with anthropological methods of research that favour empathy and an open dialogue with the researched, it is still an unsettling experience for adult researchers to take children seriously or believe what they are saying, particularly when this clashes with his/her own set of beliefs and values.<sup>(20)</sup> The feeling that, for a variety of reasons, children would systematically lie or, at least, be unable to hold an opinion, is extremely common, even among researchers.<sup>(21)</sup> It may be even more problematic for the researcher to overcome feelings of distrust when faced with what in his/her world are the undeniable signs of a subjugated mind. The apparently internalized feelings of inferiority that one may, for instance, encounter in girls whose coping mechanisms are geared towards eliciting compassion, far from engendering empathy may all too easily translate into indignation against the woes of gender subordination.<sup>(22)</sup> For these reasons, data collected by child investigators or obtained through projective methods such as drawings, games, group discussions, etc., quite apart from their participatory potential, are often believed to be more interesting and reliable than those collected by adults.<sup>(23)</sup>

Two other difficulties concerning PAR need to be mentioned here. One is that even if care is taken to generate indicators and define concepts in such a way that they reflect the experiences of the grassroots, there remains the logical system of analysis of social research that implicitly favours dominant knowledge. Consider, for instance, how the practical knowledge that children acquire of their environment and how to cope in it is

24. Burman, Erica (1994a), *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, Routledge:London and New York.

25. See reference 3, Connolly and Ennew (1996), page 133.

26. Terenzio, F., (1995), "Problématique des Enfants en Situation Difficile" in *Enfants en Recherche et en Action*, Enda Editions:Dakar, pages 22-31; see also reference 7, Nieuwenhuys (1996).

27. Lucchini, Riccardo (1996), "Theory, method and triangulation in the study of street children" in *Childhood, Children out of Place: Special Issue on Working and Street Children Vol.III, No.2, May*, page 167.

28. For more examples and a discussion of the colonial implications of western fantasies about childhood in the South, see Burman, Erica (1994b), "Innocents abroad: western fantasies of childhood and the iconography of emergencies" in *Disasters, The Journal of Disaster Studies and Management* Vol.18, No.3, pages 238-253.

currently interpreted within the discourse of dominant developmental psychology.<sup>(24)</sup> As this discourse postulates that growing up is a process divided into phases that correspond to a certain level and intensity of both physical and emotional experience, many poor children's coping mechanisms would force them into premature concerns believed to disturb their later personality. Even if poor children's coping mechanisms are proven to be effective and are part of significant experiences in the development of their identity, the implicit reference to a dominant logical system of analysis will insidiously translate into a belief that it is imperative to bring them into what pedagogy defines as normal childhood. The frequent references to stolen childhoods and to giving a childhood to the poor that one encounters in much writing on Southern children are cases in point.

The second difficulty is that, in a situation of marked social inequality, the more powerful class not only generates dominant discourses on idealized models of child development but is also in an advantageous position for using whatever knowledge is generated for its own benefit. In the case of research on urban childhood, for example, the very way in which the problem is formulated may already facilitate the application of results to suit the needs of the establishment. Research that seeks to explain the presence of poor children in the central business areas of the city is, for instance, obviously convenient for an élite that wishes to remove these children from commercially valuable public space whilst its applicability to the children themselves is at best dubious. One can indeed be conceptualized only as a "street" child when seen in opposition to an idealized "proper" child who uses the streets of business centres under close adult supervision with the purpose of acquiring consumer goods and opportunities.<sup>(25)</sup> There is little evidence that, when invited to define him/herself, any child would admit to being a street child while the term is experienced as insulting and contemptuous of the child's and his/her community's capacity to cope.<sup>(26)</sup> It is more likely that s/he will see his/her role as being in line with the ascribed role of the urban child or, alternatively, with the working role of their parents and relatives.<sup>(27)</sup>

The simple way in which poor children are labelled in conventional research as street children tends to legitimize the barely masked desire of the urban establishment to remove from the centres of business and consumption youths who apparently engage in unscheduled activities. Disclosing to the urban public information about children who survive by operating on the fringe of what society finds permissible clearly feeds on this desire. The consequences of inducing children who already have little to hold onto in terms of positive self-image to expose negative experiences are all too often ignored. Even when sufficient care is taken to conceal the identity of the individual child, and this is certainly not always the case, sensationalism tends to radiate a negative aura upon the larger group with which the readership or the public identifies the child.<sup>(28)</sup> The ease with which data on children's poverty are absorbed into a more general discourse on deviance makes a sustained effort to generate

concepts and paradigms that are critical of this same discourse imperative.

It is clear then, that, in order to make PAR a method that unites research with action, the researcher has to accept a much humbler role than the conventional one so that developing a logical system of analysis be based on a mutually enriching dialogue between him/her and the children involved. This dialogue should involve all stages of research, from the formulation of the problem and the framework of analysis down to the use and presentation of data.

While the problems a researcher may expect to encounter when undertaking action research with children are probably similar to those encountered with adults, they are certainly more difficult to solve. This is not only because seniority complicates the nature of power between researcher and researched but also because society regards children, unlike even the most wretched of adults, as essentially unable to take responsibility for their own fate. Any attempt at doing PAR with children confronts even the most unassuming researcher with major dilemmas: first, the need for the researcher to take responsibility for the children who are the intended actors in research; second, his/her ambivalent role as a mediator on whose motivation and skills children's participation depends; and third, the necessity to negotiate the needs of children whom society perceives as deviant. These issues will be discussed in the following three sections, first by pointing out the main problems that have to be addressed and second, by giving positive examples of how this has been done in practical situations.

### IV. TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

**CHILDREN ARE NOT** only more impatient than adults but their very dependency on adults for the fulfilment of even simple needs is so great that one can hardly expect them to cooperate in a research programme that does not, from the onset, address these needs seriously. Baker, Panter-Brick and Todd give us telling insight into how an apparently innocuous collection of anthropometric data, although carefully planned and explained, resulted in street children expecting medicines shortly thereafter,<sup>(29)</sup> an experience undoubtedly common to anybody who has tried to collect data from poor children without linking this activity to a direct intervention. The alternative is in no way simple. In the example above, any straightforward distribution of medicines in connection with the research would have increased dependency at least at the cognitive level resulting in, to put it bluntly, children trading their personal information for medicines. Evidently, what is at stake here is that in the unequal power relation between adults and children, the conditions for a mutually enriching dialogue must be stated clearly. Recognizing the problems associated with one's position and power vis-à-vis the children is probably the best way to do this. I am referring here not only to the need to explain to the children what one's plans are but of guaranteeing that the relationship

29. See reference 21, Baker, Panter-Brick and Todd (1996).

between children and researcher has consequences for the latter whereby s/he accepts responsibility for the ways data and results are handled.

In her clinic, AMMOR, in Belo Horizonte, Dr. Irene Adams has been addressing this problem with what she calls the "liberating plaster" method.

Inspired by Paolo Freire's approach, Dr. Irene Adams' clinic seeks to avoid the problem of expert medical knowledge making children dependent or increasing their feelings of worthlessness by using a method based on dialogical learning. The process starts right in the clinic's waiting room, where Dr. Adams explains to the children that they need to wait for their turn, not only for her sake but also because it is in their own interests to get private care. She, however, also accepts that the children have other than purely physical complaints and gives warmth, affection and the feeling that somebody cares about their personal discomfort. She takes care to accompany her explanations in the waiting room with immediate comfort, talking with children who seem upset, hugging them, looking at their wounds, listening to their complaints.

During the medical consultation Dr. Adams asks the children not only about their complaints but also for additional information on what treatment they have already had. By being asked why s/he has neglected a wound, the child is not only taught that it has to care for his/her body, that it is important to stay healthy and that s/he can consult a doctor, but is also invited to communicate how s/he feels about the treatment. So the doctor, instead of condemning the child for carelessness or apathy, and reinforcing feelings of inferiority or lack of self-respect, learns about health problems connected with life on the streets. This is how putting a plaster on becomes an act of liberation for children who struggle to value themselves. Gradually, a very personal and intimate relationship emerges that often leads to the child requesting a full medical check-up. The medical findings are discussed with the child in detail, the child receiving a copy of the photo taken by the doctor as well as free access to his/her medical file which, from then on, can also function as a storage place for his/her personal history. Consent is asked also for an HIV test with a full explanation of what this can entail. The result is a very thorough documentation of each individual case. Data on HIV infection and risk factors are not only highly reliable, they are also directly linked to preventing the spread of the disease.

This example illustrates that delivering immediate support need not be postponed until after the results of a research project are analyzed but has advantages, both in terms of quality of data and impact, over the traditional separation of the process of data-gathering and intervention. Most importantly, it demonstrates, step-by-step, that researcher and children are engaged in a common project from which both constantly benefit.

## V. BALANCING PARTICIPATION AND MEDIATION

**WE HAVE SEEN** that the role assumed by the mediator is crucial. S/he, must hence resolve the ambiguity inherent in the power that this role gives him/her over the child. Although it may not be difficult to avoid overt paternalism, it is hardly possible, and maybe not even desirable, to strip the interaction between a child and the mediator of pedagogical intentions, and the example of AMMOR does indeed suggest that these intentions are inherent to the responsibilities the mediator must assume towards the children.

But also, when there is the intention to listen and elicit participation, ambiguity is not easily resolved: it does make quite a difference if a mediator understands participation as *granting* children a voice in research (a situation in which s/he remains in full control of the process) or seeks to define the conditions of research in such a way that children *obtain* a voice. The second option has clear consequences at all levels where knowledge is built and precludes the use of pre-set categories and formalized instruments of research. If children have, until now, been excluded from research because of their childish outlook on the world, allowing them a voice should imply the generation of cognitive instruments that can capture and give meaning to their life worlds. Recognizing this, researchers have investigated the way children experience and negotiate their environment and attribute meaning to their daily experiences. Adams, for instance, has pointed to the importance of looking at the development, in middle childhood, of self-images through outdoor play and the discovery of the natural environment. He suggests that the method is best started through an introspective rethinking and revisiting of one's own places of childhood:

"The approach encourages internal dialogue and the making of meanings that only participation with children at street level will fully clarify."<sup>(30)</sup>

Others have experimented with methods of understanding opinions and experiences from within, using projective techniques such as drawings, stories, plays, drama, poetry, etc. One among many possible examples is the book made collectively by children in Soweto during writers' workshops in which they were encouraged to write stories about themselves and their lives:

"The boys would read each other's stories (and often re-read their own). They could not believe that strangers coming into the room were interested in reading their stories...What all of my students seemed to enjoy the most was getting their stories back from me, typed on the computer but still in rough form, with questions for them, asking for more details, clearing up confusion on meaning..."<sup>(31)</sup>

How these methods can be useful in empowering poor children to gain a sense of identity and purpose through PAR is exemplified by ENDA's work in West Africa with youths aged 15

30. Adams, R. "Places of Childhood" in Henderson, P. (editor) (19..), *Children and Communities*, Pluto Press:London, pages 157-168.

31. Hirsch, R.V. (editor) (1993), *A Day Like Any Other, Stories, Poetry and Art by Street Children in South Africa*, COSAW Publishing:Johannesburg, page 1.

32. See reference 26, Terenzio (1995), page 30.

33. Sibomana, René and Adorata Uwizeymana (1995), "Groupe des jeunes petits porteurs au marché de Mulindi à Kigali" in *Enfants en Recherche et en Action*, Enda Editions:Dakar, pages 166-185.

34. Coulibaly, Pierre Marie and Alassane Faye (1995), "Les petites bonnes et filles désœuvrées de Rebeuss" in *Enfants en Recherche et en Action, Une Alternative Africaine d'Animation Urbaine*, ENDA Editions:Dakar, pages 193-207; for a description of the experience in English, see also Diaw, Bamba (1996), "Participatory research is the first step towards political action: the case of young female domestic servants in Dakar, Senegal in *Childhood, Children out of Place: Special Issue on Working and Street Children Vol.3, No.2, May*, pages 271-278.

35. See reference 3, Nieuwenhuys (1995), page 63.

to 18. In its search for an alternative to established paradigms of assistance, ENDA has gradually been discovering how apparently marginalized youngsters in Dakar would not only conserve traditional forms of collective organization but also busily invent new ones.<sup>(32)</sup> As ENDA decided to prioritize the values which these youngsters were reproducing every day of their lives, its intervention became a conscious attempt at building children's knowledge. The use of child tailored tools of research played a crucial role therein. In Rwanda, for instance, a laborious exercise under the guidance of an educator led the youngsters to identify clothing as their main need. From there, they investigated possibilities for adding to their meagre income from portorage at the local market place and decided to initiate a collective project to make and sell charcoal. They planned the research on a day-to-day basis according to what was reached the previous day and not according to a predetermined time schedule. Problems regarding the choice and use of research instruments to collect data were likewise solved, the youths finding it counter-productive to separate observation and interviewing, preferring the more informal chatting, walking and visiting instead.<sup>(33)</sup> In another ENDA experience, this time with young female domestics in Dakar, the girls discovered the advantage of representing abstract categories in ways that made sense, for instance, by using the image of the one who delivers children to explain the concept of independent variable. To devise meaningful methods of time planning the girls likewise represented activities in sequence and frequently evaluated whether they had collected enough information to proceed to the execution of the next sequence.<sup>(34)</sup>

What these experiences illuminate is the central role of the street educator or youth worker as an instrument of research. The street educator or youth worker is not so much a person skilled at applying sets of procedures and techniques but is a reflecting actor, a responsible person who is thinking and rethinking constantly what s/he is doing and is sharing this process of knowledge-building with the children in his/her care. As pointed out by the participants at the InDRA workshop of 1994, the dividing line between what a street educator does in his/her daily practice and action research is but thin, the difference lying essentially in the planning of moments of conscious reflection and documentation.<sup>(35)</sup> In other words, the ENDA experiences may be called action research not only because they are undertaken with the intention of building children's needs and wishes into knowledge but also because the children reflect upon each step and document the process.

Documentation should certainly not be limited to recording and reporting but should produce texts that voice different meanings and feelings (multi-vocality). Figure 1 is an example of such a text, the product of an exercise where Dakar domestics were asked to prioritize the variables that influenced their lack of training opportunities.

The text, graphically representing a father wielding a large club against a running girl, suggests the existence of conflicting interests between the girls and their fathers, of a different na-



ture to that which was finally retained by the group (the lack of training opportunities). Such a text is important for later analysis: if the activities undertaken do not work out as expected, one can return to the text and ask why so little importance was given to crucial information on the girl's powerlessness, how this problem could have been retained and addressed, how it relates to the lack of professional training of the girls, etc.

Although ENDA is not explicit about how educators' skills are best developed, one may expect that it requires a considerable degree of professional talent as well as the support of an organization that has put PAR on its agenda. For most organizations, this is rather the exception than the rule, direct relief being, in the case of children, still more popular than more sophisticated approaches aimed at strengthening resilience. SETPAR's experience in training street educators through action research is illustrative.<sup>(36)</sup> The training aimed primarily at developing the professional skills of street educators to enable them to understand and negotiate their own and poor children's place in urban society. The understanding of meaningful patterns of child rearing by the urban poor, of the tools available to children for coping, and of the ways in which children's participation in the formulation and execution of interventions can be enhanced were some of the main objectives to be achieved. To this end, 17 street educators working in seven South Indian cities<sup>(37)</sup> were invited to join a two-year long PAR training programme during which they would seek to start an intervention in close cooperation with the children and with the help of a team of trainers. Before starting their field work, the trainees participated in workshops where they learned about PAR. The resulting activities demonstrated the relevance of using methods of work, that the street educators had already evolved in practice, in response to children's needs as instruments of research. Among these were, for example, the use of yoga to enhance resilience, counselling methods evolved by working children to help their peers and various ways devised to improve the quality of the interaction between agencies, educators and children.

SETPAR is expecting the street educators to show a great deal of competence not only in activating children but also, and this appears to be the most difficult part, in negotiating their choices both with the team of trainers and their colleagues in the NGOs where they are working. Dealing with the institutional setting of their work appears to be even more difficult than working with the children, and this points to where the main drawbacks will come from if one seeks to engage children in researching and changing their environment. It is clear that, although the child figures prominently in NGOs' goals for children, the interests of the adult professionals who run the organization are not, in any obvious way, subordinate to those of the children they serve. In this respect, an NGO for children is like any other organization (school, hospital or bank) primarily geared towards protecting its own survival. This is especially true of NGOs that are small and operate in a highly competitive donor market. In such a setting, changes are felt as particularly threatening when they come from the lower rungs of the hierarchy, rungs *de facto*

36. SETPAR (Street Educators' Training Programme through Action Research), carried out under InDRA's project Child Welfare for the Urban Poor between 1994 and 1997, is coordinated by Fr. George Kollashany, Don Bosco Tech, Hospet, Karnataka, South India

37. The cities are Bangalore, Vijayawada, Cochin, Hyderabad, Raichur, Tumkur and Hospet.

occupied by the street educators and the children. Pressures exercised by government and foreign donor agencies, the concerns of public authorities, the moral debates of the moment, etc., tend to discourage street educators from engaging in a discourse on children that, at first sight, seems to require a thorough insight into the major issues facing society - issues for which, ironically, politicians, local authorities and business elites have no answers.

## VI. SPACES FOR CHILDREN'S AGENCY

**THE THIRD DILEMMA** of PAR with children is essentially about negotiating spaces in which children can legitimately act upon their environment. It may be useful, in this connection, to return to the AMMOR experience. Even if sensitive data on HIV-infection, as in the case of AMMOR, is gathered primarily to help children's liberation from feelings of self-contempt or self-destructive behaviour, there remains the problem that health authorities may have a stake in them and have interests in mind that do not necessarily coincide with those of the children. As the tragic news about the activities of death squads in Latin American cities has shown, negative representations of children's lives can go as far as identifying their very presence on the streets as a threat to public safety.<sup>(38)</sup>

With respect to AMMOR, how could Dr. Adams manage her data in such a way that not only the interests of the individual patient but also those of the children as a vulnerable group are safeguarded and balanced against those of health authorities and the public at large? I think that positioning children's health problems against a backdrop of the historical events that have exposed them to difficulties such as wars, economic crisis, famine, displacement, etc., and demonstrating their resourcefulness in facing these problems could be a way of establishing and safeguarding public respect for children's rights. It is important to keep in mind that the representation of the children of the urban poor as the embodiment of evil can only exist insofar as the structures of children's exploitation are ignored and, more importantly, the social actors that dominate both children's and their parents' lives are absolved from responsibility. Combining action with research must, in short, extend to criticizing the failure of the state and society to safeguard the integrity of childhood and to gaining leverage for children's more general rights as citizens.<sup>(39)</sup>

Because society grants but few political rights to children, and participative procedures are equally weak, there are considerable problems involved in the issue of children's civil rights which PAR has the potential to address. In his discussion on children's participation, Hart<sup>(40)</sup> has graphically represented the powerlessness of children in the following ladder:

- manipulation
- decoration
- tokenism

38. Dimenstein, Gilberto (1991), *Brazil War on Children*, Latin American Bureau, Research and Action, London.

39. See also the recommendations of the InDRA workshop in reference 3, Nieuwenhuys (1995), page 81.

40. Hart, R.A. (1992), *Children's Participation, from Tokenism to Citizenship*, Innocenti Essays No.4, UNICEF:Florence.

- assigned but informed participation
- consulted and informed participation
- adult initiated, shared decisions with children
- child initiated and directed
- child initiated, shared decisions with adults.

Only the last four levels actually allow any kind of participation while only the last one is useful at the level of interventions for children since it is at this stage that they are taken seriously at the level of political decision-making. Unhappily, Hart also recognizes that this is the most difficult if not unlikely form of participation since it requires caring adults who are attuned to the interests of children and who have the means to help them voice their needs and desires. Parents, teachers or street educators, for instance, although often devoted to children's interests, generally have few means of supporting them to gain political leverage, being themselves socially and politically powerless.

An interesting experience in addressing the issue of children's powerlessness with PAR comes from Maria Cristina Salazar who worked in Bogotá in 1985-87 as a member of a team of researchers from the National University of Colombia. The aim of the initiative, sponsored by the Ministry of Labour, was to promote working children's self-organization in the hope that this would make them less vulnerable in the face of exploitation. From the onset, the research team was critical of the forms of knowledge it was to utilize and used different instruments (socio-drama, autobiographies, interviews and oral history) to encourage the children to share the knowledge they had about their families and their work situation. As Salazar points out, a truly emphatic and *vivencia*<sup>(41)</sup> attitude on the part of the team helped make the children appreciate their own intellectual capacity to produce pertinent knowledge.<sup>(42)</sup> This was articulated when they understood that:

"...the expression of their ideas and feelings, such as in the poems they wrote, was an element of the knowledge they acquired and, as such, formed a justifiable basis for their world outlook."<sup>(43)</sup>

The research team helped establish self-esteem by talking to the children of human rights and of their cultural origins, strengthening the belief that they could act upon their environment. The idea that working children could establish an organization that furthered their rights was thus quickly established. The process was consolidated by the creation of cultural meeting spaces where the children could undertake activities that helped them understand the need to contest the dominant value system that condemned them as child labourers.

The process did not, of course, run as smoothly as the above description suggests and the various steps were more often than not developed to counter the perceived apathy and lack of interest by the children. However, the initiative did yield results as

41. A Spanish neologism to translate the German *Erlebnis*, an experience by which a person finds fulfilment both in the workings of the inner-self and in the otherness of the wider society (see Fals-Borda, Orlando and Mohammed Anisur Rahman (editors) (1991), *Action and Knowledge, Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action Research*, Apex Press:New York and Intermediate Technology Publications:London, pages 54-64).

42. Salazar, M.C., (1991), "Young laborers in Bogotá: breaking authoritarian ramparts" in Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991), see reference 41, pages 55-56.

43. See reference 42, Salazar (1991), page 55.

a number of children left their old, demeaning jobs, to start self-managed bakeries and carpentry shops. For the Bombay boy, with whose words this article began, this would have been a positive achievement indeed. In Salazar's words:

"The aspirations...nurtured individual hope and facilitated common effort. They stimulated a feeling of viability in collective and/or associated action. At least, the child labourers participating in the project now know that they are not alone, that their problems are shared by others and that they are capable of specific actions to transform their reality."<sup>44</sup>

44. See reference 42, Salazar (1991), page 60.

## VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

**IS PAR INDEED** the fast, cheap and reliable approach that can help overcome fundamental problems of doing research with powerless but no less active children? The answer is both yes and no. If used purely to address social tensions caused by the mounting threat posed by the children of the poor, by tightening the authorities' control over these children, PAR cannot be but a "quick and dirty" method of obtaining sensitive data that can be particularly threatening to the children's safety. This paper has attempted to outline an alternative notion of PAR, one where children's building of knowledge is not subordinated to that of the urban establishment but is conceived as part of the dynamic that lays bare the contradictions of contemporary childhood and articulates its contribution to urban culture. Rather than being fast, PAR is bound to be a long drawn-out process that should optimally last the entire period in which children's agency is in need of mediation. Nor is the method cheap, requiring a professional staff backed by sufficient financial resources and external support to be carried out in a sensible way.

The assumption that children are unable to act in their own interests is so widespread that we can not think of any kind of intervention that is not at least guided by adults. Ironically, teachers and youth workers are not only best equipped to fulfill this role, they are also the traditional vehicles of authority and control. Top-down political thinking all too often sees them as mere instruments of enforcement of policies as disparate as mass vaccination, HIV-control, political indoctrination, cultural assimilation, control of truancy, etc. Often burdened by heavy responsibilities *vis-à-vis* their employers, difficult work circumstances and poor pay, without a considerable improvement in their conditions of work, realistically one can hardly expect them to make additional efforts to create spaces that invite children's participation. But this is certainly not enough and, as suggested by the ENDA experience, the improvement in working conditions should be backed by professional training as a street educator generally also needs training to be able to understand his/her own position in society and how it relates to the children's. This should help her/him acquire the skills necessary

to mediate between the children and the agency or institution that employs her/him and start a dialogue with the media, the public and policy makers.

In short, PAR has to solve the contradiction of uniting a pedagogical practice, which is inherent in any action undertaken by adults for children, with a practice that is informed by children's own knowledge. If it is to succeed, it must critically build upon experiences that allow for a maximum degree of creativity, diversity and local initiative. This is certainly not easy and there is a real danger of raising expectations which cannot be satisfied and exposing already vulnerable children to hostility and negative stereotyping. Rather than foster participation, the failure to contest and protect spaces for legitimate and meaningful action may lead children to discover the futility of it and strengthen already existing feelings of disaffection towards urban society.

However, if these requirements are balanced against the costs of conventional research and what they presuppose in terms of instituting and maintaining implementing structures, the advantages of an approach that unites the building of knowledge with the strengthening of self-reliance becomes apparent. The Northern structures that support childhood, such as schools, orphanages, family allowances, family laws, etc., are extremely costly. They also require social consensus of the subordinate and passive role of children in society, a consensus which, in the cities of the South, children's coping strategies have led them to question. The situation in these cities suggests models of negotiated childhood that may offer legitimate spaces for children's agency. It is precisely in taking up this challenge of uniting a resourceful approach to childhood's changing landscape with the acknowledgement of children's agency in shaping it that the pay-offs of PAR with children may be expected.