

Creating Space for Child Participation in Local Governance in Tanzania: Save the Children and Children's Councils

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Children's right to be heard is internationally recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Tanzania has ratified both of these international instruments, and the Tanzania Law of the Child Act 2009 recognises the right of children to participate in all decisions which affect them in the family, at school, and in their communities. Children, therefore, possess the right to participate in how their communities are governed by local government authorities. However, realising children's right to participate is challenging given deep-seated social views that children have limited status and capacity.

This brief summarises the principal findings of a study which examined children's councils supported by Save the Children as one avenue to promote children's participation in local governance in Tanzania. The research found that the councils were genuine, child-led organisations that have contributed to improving local service delivery to children. However, councils are operational in a limited number of districts, and, where councils are in place, local authorities are yet to consistently involve them in their decision-making processes.

KEY POINTS

- **Children have the right to participate in how their communities are governed by local government authorities.**
- **Children's councils have made children's problems more visible in their local areas. As a consequence, local governments have been made more aware of the challenges faced by children and their responsibility for improving child-related services.**
- **In terms of engagement with local authorities, the councils tend to be largely engaged for special events, e.g., the Day of the African Child, thus stalling further participation.**
- **Factors inhibiting the effective involvement of councils in local government include the lack of accountability mechanisms and guidance on the functions of guardians, limited funds and limited political will.**
- **Government needs to fast-track its commitment to child participation at the local level.**
- **This means extending the councils throughout the country and providing clear guidance on the roles of the councils, the involvement of adults, and the responsibility of the government and civil society in supporting councils.**

Introduction

In 2002, the Junior Council of the United Republic of Tanzania was created at the national level and the government committed to extend the Council throughout the country. Responding to slow implementation by the government, Save the Children created child-led organisations (children's councils) in several districts in Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. This study analysed the operations of the councils in Temeke, Lindi and Mjini Magharibi to assess whether these bodies had facilitated child participation in local government processes. The main study objectives were to examine (i) how the children's councils function; (ii) their engagement with local authorities; (iii) the impact of the councils; and (iv) what factors facilitate and inhibit collaboration between the councils and local government authorities.

The research was designed as an exploratory qualitative study. Focus groups were conducted with members of the children's councils in the

three research locations. Semi-structured interviews were also held with children who were not members of the councils, as well as with Save the Children officers, local government officials, and representatives of the Ministry for Community Development, Gender and Children. To complement the data gathered through the focus groups and interviews, key documents were gathered on the formation and operation of the children's councils.

Findings

The functioning of children's councils

The children's councils were created primarily by Save the Children, with some involvement from local authorities and children themselves. The councils are child-led organisations and their members are elected by children. Adults may occupy advisory positions. All children (persons below the age of 18) may become members of the councils, and seats are reserved for most vulnerable children. The councils do not have permanent funding and they fundraise for each activity. The most consistent source of funding has been Save the Children. To date, local authorities have provided mainly logistical support.

Adults are significant actors in the functioning of the councils. The study identified four main roles that were performed by adults: (i) partners in the creation of the councils; (ii) advisors, in particular, as the council guardians; (iii) supporters of council activities; and (iv) gatekeepers. The guardian is the most important adult role within the council. The guardian's responsibilities range from giving advice to the councils and facilitating council meetings to advocating on behalf of children. Most often, the guardians are appointed from amongst local government officials, and they constitute the formal link between the children's councils and local government authorities.

Save the Children has played a central role in the establishment and operation of the councils. The organisation has facilitated training and capacity building to council members, assisted the councils in drafting essential documents, such as their constitutions, and provided financial support and safe spaces for children's meetings. Save the Children has been a resource organisation for both the councils and the local government authorities.

Engagement with local authorities

The study identified a number of ways that local government authorities interact with the children's councils including: provision of advice and logistical support to the councils; supervision of council elections; capacity building and training on children's rights; occasional invitations to members of the councils to attend local government meetings; and assistance in solving child-related problems upon submission of requests by the councils. The main point of contact is through the local officials acting as council guardians, however, these officials are usually low-ranking officers. Moreover, children's councils tend to be largely engaged by local authorities for special events, such as the Day of the African Child, hence there is no continuity in their participation.

Impact of the children's councils

Children's councils have made children's problems more visible in their local areas. As a consequence, local governments have been made more aware of the challenges faced by children and their responsibility for improving child-related services. The councils have been actively involved in identifying vulnerable children in their communities and facilitating their access to services, for example, re-integration into school or access to anti-retrovirals. Children's access to information held by the local governments has also become easier. Local officials occasionally consult the councils, and the association of the councils with local authorities has legitimised the councils in the eyes of the community as the representatives of children's views.

Factors that facilitate and inhibit the collaboration between children's councils and local government authorities

The study identified several factors that facilitate the participation of children's councils in local affairs. A good relationship between children and high-ranking district officials is an essential component in facilitating collaboration, underpinned by the positive attitude of local officials towards citizen's participation generally and their commitment in supporting the creation of children's councils specifically. The existence of a designated official in charge of children's issues is a further indicator of the government accepting responsibility for children's welfare. Clarity in the

roles and responsibilities of adults associated with the councils and the availability of financial and moral support from NGOs were other factors that facilitated children's participation in local decision-making.

Amongst the challenges faced by children's councils, the study found that children's issues can be marginalised by local officials, which was confirmed by some children's perceptions that local authorities do not take them seriously. The

traditional view regarding the position of children in the Tanzanian society – i.e. that children lack the knowledge and capacity to contribute to adult decisions – and the lack of institutionalisation of child participation also undermine the impact of the councils. The lack of accountability mechanisms and clear guidance on the functions of the council guardians, and limited funds and political will to allocate funds to support child participation were further factors inhibiting the effective involvement of the councils in local governance.

Policy conclusions and recommendations

Despite the government commitment to the creation of child-led organisations throughout the country, the establishment and support of the councils in Temeke, Lindi and Mjini Magharibi was largely due to Save the Children. This is clearly a positive development but over-reliance on Save the Children endangers the councils' sustainability should the organisation's activities move on from a certain local government area or undergo a change in focus.

Where local governments have been involved in supporting the councils, the lack of delineation of responsibilities between local governments and Save the Children has sometimes caused confusion for the children's councils and the adults involved. This issue needs to be addressed and the results brought to children's attention.

Although there are many benefits derived from children's councils working with local officials, an accountability framework for council guardians must be established to avoid any misuse of power. Such a framework needs to be developed in an open and transparent manner to avoid any antagonism between the councils and their guardians.

By identifying children in need and facilitating their access to services, the children's councils surveyed contributed to the fulfilment of statutory duties by local governments. By embracing child participation, local governments can harness this representative potential of children's council to improve the well-being of children in their jurisdictions.

Based on the research findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

For the government (local and central)

- Enhance the understanding of children's rights by local government officials, parents and communities;
- Create mechanisms to involve children in decisions which affect them;
- Ensure that children have access to local government information;
- Develop an accountability framework for council guardians; and
- Revive the support for the Junior Council at national level to increase the impetus for supporting the councils at local government level.

For children's councils

- Improve children's understanding of the functions of local government authorities;
- Develop follow-up mechanisms so that the outcomes of children's contribution are monitored;

- Stimulate the council guardians to act as children’s advocates within the local structures;
- Broaden the contact with local government officials so that the councils become more visible and they do not rely exclusively on the guardians to promote the councils; and
- Create links with senior local officials, where such links do not exist, who may influence the decision-making at local level and promote the prioritisation of children’s interests, including child participation.

All

- Create opportunities for local government officials and adults in the community to work together with the councils;
- Strike a balance between the involvement of the adults in the functioning of the councils and the independence of the councils; and
- Clarify the roles of the local governments and Save the Children in supporting the councils.

Overall, the study highlights the need for the government to fast-track its commitment to institutionalise child participation at the local level. This means extending the councils throughout the country and providing clear guidance on the roles of the councils, the involvement of adults, and the responsibility of the government and civil society in supporting the councils.

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