

Rejuvenate Dialogue
18th May 2022

Setting the scene

The impetus for this dialogue came out [our first Rejuvenate working paper](#) – which formed the basis of our living archive. In the paper, we tried to map the people, projects and publications that occupied the space at the intersection of child rights and participation.

What we found in our review was that most of the ‘evidence’ presented by what we think of as substantively participatory work, the end point of which would be child/youth-led work, was evidence of *how* to do participation well. As evidence, it was slightly circular because it started from an assumption that rights are intrinsically valid and then tried to show how to best engage with children/young people, focusing on process rather than outcomes.

In a global context of shrinking civic space, and in which rights agendas are being systematically eroded, a conversation on how and why we evidence rights becomes even more important. In this dialogue, we asked: Why do we measure what, and for whom? how can we include children and young people in these processes? and how can monitoring and evaluation work serve accountability to a diverse range of stakeholders?

Highlights

(You can also watch the presentations: <https://youtu.be/qthfbl9aGA>)

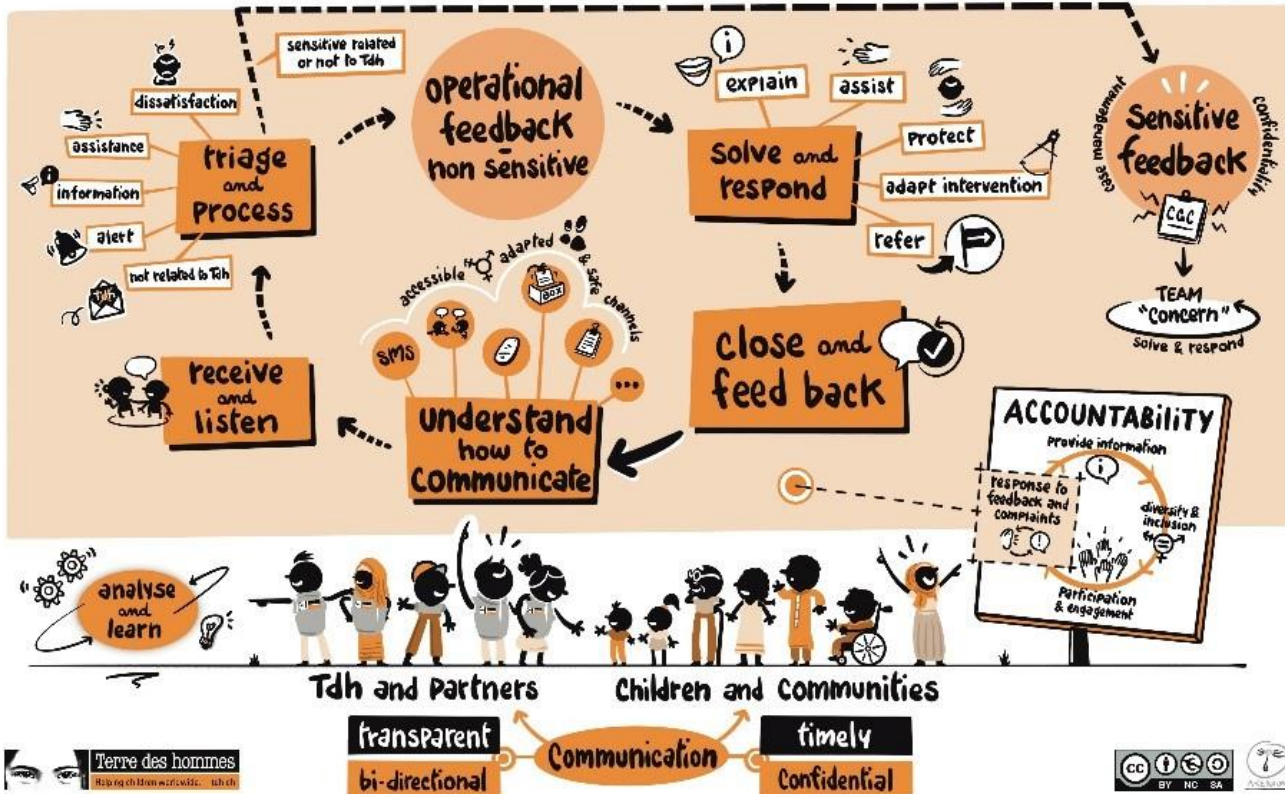
Vicky Johnson (University of Highlands and Islands) began the dialogue by introducing the Rejuvenate project and reflecting briefly on the previous dialogues. Vicky also spoke about the importance of considering the politics of evidence and thinking critically about what evidence is and who takes it seriously.

Tessa Lewin (Institute of Development Studies) shared the motivation behind this dialogue, emphasising the necessity of talking about child and youth rights beyond a focus on advocacy. Next, she introduced the dialogues’ three guest speakers: Kristen Hope, Reece Slade and Marina Apgar.

Kristen Hope, Research, Advocacy & Participation Advisor at Terre des hommes, began her presentation by highlighting some of the challenges of evidencing participatory rights work. She spoke about global monitoring and evaluation systems based on quantitative indicators, which inadequately capture complex. Kristen argued that M&E is not just a technical issue, but a political one, in which power relations determine both which indicators are deemed viable evidence, and whose opinion counts when measuring. She suggested that a focus on evidencing the efficacy of children and young people’s participation potentially undermines a rights-based approach. Kristen advocated for building accountability to children and young people into monitoring and evaluation work, and for having young voices as part of these conversations.

Complaints and Feedback Response Mechanism

How to receive and respond to requests, information, concerns



Source: Terre des Hommes

Reece Slade, environmental and child rights activist, endorsed Kristen's emphasis on the importance of creating spaces for children and young people to participate. He suggested that central to embedding a culture of children's participation was the use of localised and jargon-free language – commenting that existing spaces are often Eurocentric, English-speaking, and jargon-filled, in ways that exclude many children.

He suggested that the best way to overcome these communication challenges, and not lose nuance, is through substantive participation with children. Reece shared a personal experience in which through observing young children playing with some toys, he realised the toys needed to be more robustly designed if they were to be fit for purpose.

Reece highlighted the importance of social media in the lives of children and young people as a platform through which to hold organizations and corporations to account. Kristen and Reece discussed what 'good' monitoring looks like in the context of child rights work. Reece emphasised the importance of building children's ability and confidence through the practice of participation; children given the opportunity to participate will learn that their opinions are legitimate and worth sharing.

'Just from young, I've been involved with non-profits and different organizations who are very child rights-focused and very much freedom-of-speech focused. And through that it just kind of sparked a culture within myself. I got comfortable in those spaces to speak out, and then from there I was in my principal's office every second week to complain about something. So, I think it's one thing we should definitely try and create questionnaires and all of those sort of things to kind of create the culture, but it's something that will naturally happen in my opinion if we keep asking children about their opinions, and if we keep asking them about how they feel about something at the end of the day children will just say it...children who are young, learn the most from children who are a bit older'

Reece also argued that support for children's participation will eventually lead to a culture of critically engaged citizens:

'It's no longer going to be doing things for good but rather, doing good things that are good, and actually have like an overall benefit for all of society because if we can uplift communities and children in beneficial ways they're going to be creating entrepreneurs and people who can speak up and have their own culture and confidence to participate in different spaces, and from that there's going to be more people challenging each other in respective industries.'

After Reece and Kristen, **Marina Apgar**, Research Fellow at IDS, invited the audience to think about evaluation not as a 'overly technical, scary, and instrumentalist sort of process' but as a method for bringing together the political and technical to build a robust evidence base that speaks to multiple audiences. She noted that many critical conversations are taking place in M and E spaces today, and that one of the more promising methods for capturing evaluation data is story telling.

Sharing her experience from the CLARISSA programme, Marina outlined how they were actively trying to create cultures of participation, through directly involving children, and other stakeholders, in defining and measuring both what matters, and what works.

This ethic of participation is embedded in the programme, but also proactively nurtured through capacity building work that facilitates reflection and builds agency.

Marina advocated for the use of multiple methods of data collection and multiple types of data, arguing that this allows for deeply participatory work, that can also contribute to a robust evidence base.

'If quantitative data is useful, you collect quantitative data. In all theory-based evaluation, you're not driven by the method, but you're driven by the questions of the different stakeholders. Critical would be that the children and youth are part of deciding what the right question is to ask, right, then I think you're getting some more radical participation in the evaluation space, it's not just in the data you collect from them, it's how they're actually involved in setting the agenda.'

Marina's three key take aways for evaluation children's participation were:

1. Use multiple methods (be flexible and find the right mix of methods that allow you to capture lived experience)
2. Bring together accountability and learning – they are not dichotomous
3. Embrace audience plurality: engaging with the needs of different stakeholders will produce the most useful and convincing evidence

Discussion

After Kristen, Reece and Marina's conversation, the dialogue opened to questions and comments from participants in which several topics were discussed: children's participation in oppressive/authoritarian contexts; fitting complex, multifaceted change processes into rigid evaluation categories; and the role of allyship (or adjacency) in fostering child/youth participation.

Challenging contexts

A participant from Myanmar asked how one can promote children's participation in a context of habitual oppression, or in cultures in which participation of children is discouraged and children do not easily express their opinions and ideas.

In his response, Reece talked about the importance of transparency in researchers' questions of children – and the need for researchers to fully explain the rationale behind the participation that they are facilitating, in order to make their questions relevant to children. Kristen commented on the role of advocacy in building cultures of participation.

Marina invited those working in challenging environments to ask: 'Why do we need this data? How are we going to use it? How do the people that we serve understand the use of this information?' all of which are related to accountability.

Evaluation boxes

Raisa Philip, a participant from India, shared a story of working with a group of youth to document the extraordinary work they have been doing and articulate it in such a way that it fitted funding criteria. She mentioned the time one needed to invest to adequately communicate such work, and pointed to a recent [Rejuvenate blog](#) on this issue.

Marina empathised and commented that at times we needed to structure processes around activist agendas, not M and E ones. She suggested that in such scenarios grounded and embedded partnerships become extremely important in building sensemaking and learning processes that serve M and E.

"I always encourage M&E people to not just think about the boxes and the logframe, but to think about the broader process that they are trying to support."

Vicky added although time was vital, it was also a question of educating the funders and the adults, that a wonderful researcher she had worked within the Caribbean used the analogy of a buffet approach -once people have tasted a dish, they'll find that they like it. Sometimes we have to create opportunities and spaces for adults and funders to experience children's participation for them to fully understand its benefit.

Part of what Rejuvenate is trying to do is to communicate between different people and provide a space for this to happen. Kristen emphasised the importance of allyship, and storytelling, and the need for agility and creativity to be able to see opportunities for where we can capture learning; to identify where there are the allies that can help to reduce the burden of the time it takes to translate good work into evidence.

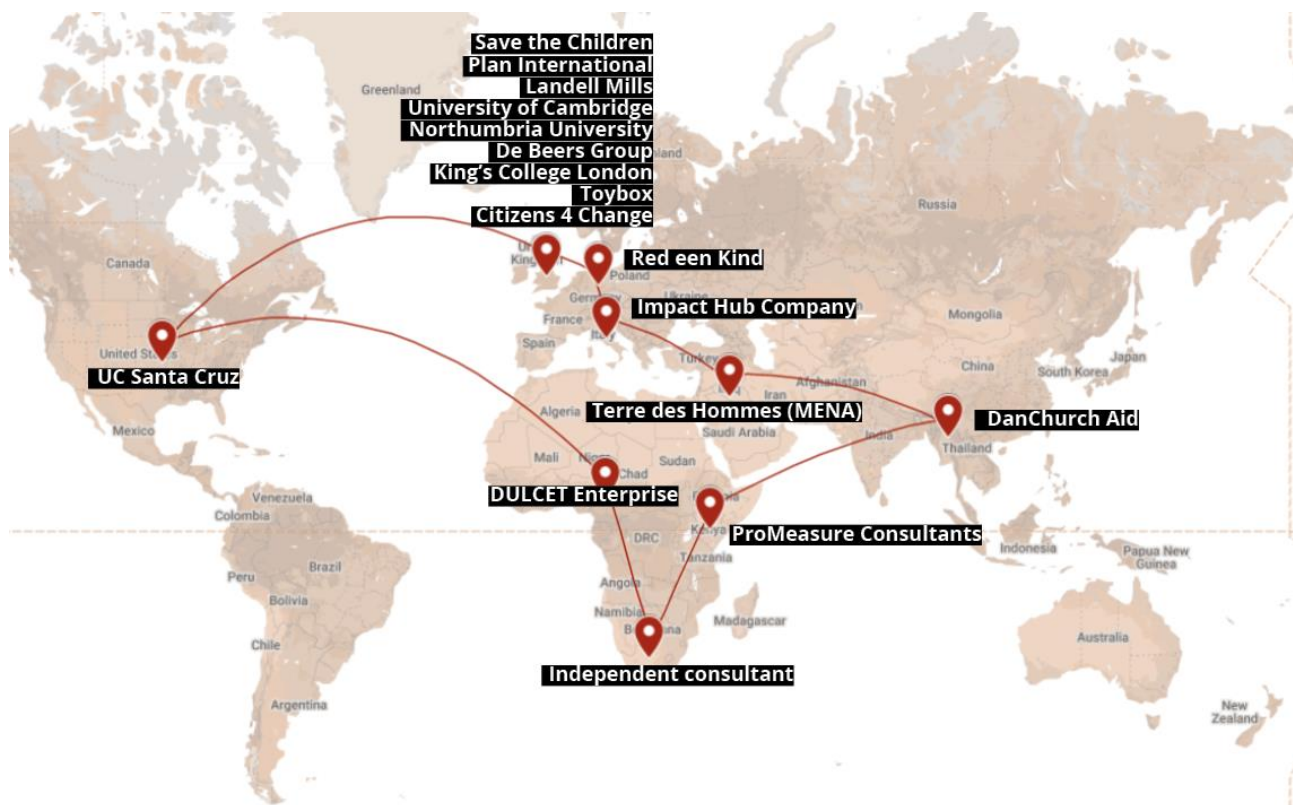
She argued that we should be doing participatory child rights work irrespective of whether or not we can effectively evidence it; we should be seeking to support and uphold rights because they are part of the infrastructure for how we live on this planet. The right to participate is a right in itself, and it can contribute to building better evidence – we need to be wary of instrumentalising it, which can be harmful to all rights.

Tessa supported Kristen's comment but suggested that the language of adjacency, as taken up by the Fees Must Fall/Rhodes Must Fall movement, might be more useful than that of allyship because of its central recognition of erasure of power that sometimes accompanies an assumed allyship, and a recognition of the importance of accountability, and the time and work that substantive participation involves.

Tina Campt defines adjacency as 'the reparative work of transforming proximity into accountability: the labour of positioning oneself in relation to another in ways that revalue and redress the complex histories of dispossession.'

Building connections

Attendees included adults and youth researchers from across the globe in conversation with a range of decision makers and funders. Organisations can be seen on the map below.



Source: Map data ©2022 Google, INEGI

Continuing the conversation

Blogs – REJUVENATE keep conversations around child and youth rights going through regular [blogs](#). If you have an idea for a blog, please do [get in touch with one of the REJUVENATE team via our website](#).

Explore and submit to our [Living Archive](#) – a collection of organisations, projects and resources all focused on child and youth rights and participation. We've included some examples in boxes in this paper. If you have an item you think others in the field can learn from, please [fill out our submission form](#).

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