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**VOLUME 4 NUMÉRO 1**
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PARTICIPATION AS CAPACITY-BUIL-
DING FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

Within the framework of the "capability approach" to human rights, this paper argues that adults who facilitate participatory planning and design with children and youth have an ethical obligation to foster young people's capacities for active democratic citizenship. Practitioners often worry, justifiably, that if young people fail to see their ideas realized, they may become disillusioned and alienated from political life. Based on the experience of the Growing Up in Cities program of UNESCO, four rules of good practice are distilled which can help promote young people's belief in the value of collective action, regardless of the challenges that the full implementation of their ideas may face.

## RÉSUMÉ

Inscrit dans l'approche des « capacités » en matière des droits humains, cet article fait valoir que les adultes qui soutiennent la participation des jeunes et des enfants en design et en planifica-tion ont l'obligation morale d'encourager ceux-ci à exercer une citoyenneté démocratique active. Toutefois, les praticiens ont souvent peur de décevoir et de détourner les jeunes de la vie poli-tique s'ils n'arrivent pas à voir leurs idées se réaliser. Sur la base de l'expérience du programme Grandir en ville, de l'UNESCO, quatre règles de pratique sont établies afin de promouvoir auprès des jeunes la confiance sur la valeur de l'action collective, indépendamment des défis que repré-sente la pleine réalisation de leurs idées.

## THE CAPABILITY APPROACH TO POLITICAL ACTION

As part of the examination of the great challenges facing humanity that Kofi Annan spurred the United Nations to undertake during his term as Secretary General, WIDER (the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University) convened the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, and other foundational thinkers to engage with issues related to the exercise of human rights. The United Nations is composed of 192 Member States, where people practice diverse religions and a multitude of cultures and customs. On what grounds can the United Nations unify all states behind the doctrine of human rights? What if a religious precept or a cultural tradition clashes with a human right? On what basis can the rights articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—or in related documents like the Convention on the Rights of the Child—trump respect for religious freedom and cultural diversity?

Sen answered this challenge, in part, by pointing out that all cultures contain internal divisions.[1] In Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and the Western world, we can find historic voices that claim that there is an inherent dignity in being human and that all people are due tolerance and freedom to pursue happiness, as well as voices that advise that social stability depends on disciplining the many under the authority of the few. Sen, Nussbaum and their colleagues proposed that the proper course is a "capability approach" to human rights.[2] In the tradition of Aristotle, this approach argues that there are certain inherent universal capacities that constitute our nature as human beings. We have, for example, not just a capacity to eat but the capacity to eat in sociable ways—however these ways may be defined by different cultures. A child scavenging discarded food from rubbish bins cannot be justified by any culture. We have the capacity to speak, and with it the capacity to express our ideas about how to make our lives and our societies function well. Crushing this capacity cannot be justified. The more fully that we are enabled to develop our different constructive capacities as human beings, the argument continues, the more fully we flourish and find happiness. Therefore governments cannot fulfill their obligation to protect citizens' life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness by merely granting rights. They need to assist citizens to fully realize their capabilities, and only sanction beliefs and customs that are in harmony with this goal.

What are the implications of this argument for the ethics of child and youth participation in urban planning and design?

I think that every time we engage in a participatory project, this argument directs us to ask ourselves the question, "What are the critical human capacities that this project can help young people develop, and how can this be done with the greatest likelihood of success and the least risk of harm?"

Many claims are made about potential benefits for young people from participation in shaping their cities and towns: that it contributes to their sense of self-esteem; their sense of self-efficacy; their resilience in overcoming obstacles; their environmental knowledge and awareness; their basic skills, particularly in areas of communication; and their development of active citizenship. I am going to focus on the potential to foster democratic citizenship. Participatory planning and design is most fundamentally about the motivation to take action as a citizen and the skills to do so. This kind of political engagement is also, as Aristotle said in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094b1-8), a superordinate capacity that includes all constituent capacities. The practice of citizenship affords people opportunities to learn about their environment, overcome obstacles, hone their communication skills, and gain a sense of achievement and self-worth.

At the same time, participatory planning has the potential of doing harm instead of good, with a particular risk of harming the development of this capacity for citizenship. The Call for Papers for the colloquium on "Understanding and Shaping the City with Children and Youth" stated that practitioners "worry about raising false hopes, perpetuating ineffective practices and delivering disappointment to young people who are just beginning to explore their citizenship." Research suggests that this is a reasonable worry. For example, in a survey of 837 young people aged 13 to 20 who had taken part in municipal

projects in Austria, 85% said that participation had strengthened their democratic consciousness, but 56% said that their disinterest in politics had increased.[3] Probably not coincidentally, 56% is the same proportion who said that they didn't believe that their efforts were taken seriously by adults, in particular politicians. In one of the most frustrating experiences of the Growing Up in Cities program of UNESCO, the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council commissioned four new program sites to obtain young peoples' ideas related to areas scheduled for redevelopment. After workshops were held and young people presented their recommendations at public events, their input was consigned to a shelf. Three years later, when an external evaluator tracked down a number of the original participants, young people expressed appreciation for the original experience but also anger and disillusionment that little or nothing had been done.[4]

If we believe that being able to participate in political choices that govern our lives and shape our environments is one of our core capabilities as human beings and a component of our happiness, then all of us who work with young people must seek to ensure that projects increase their interest in political activity and their confidence that they can improve their lives through collective effort. But in the hurly-burly, hard-knuckled world of politics and city planning, how can we guarantee these outcomes?

This paper organizes some suggested answers to this question around four basic rules of good practice that I have derived from 13 years of involvement with Growing Up in Cities. The program involves young people in documenting local resources and risks, prioritizing their recommendations, and working in partnership with adults to improve the urban environment.[5] Over the years, this list of basic operating rules has grown and I have modified my understanding of our original rules. I will also draw on more than 50 years of research on political socialization (the means by which young people are incorporated into public debate and decision-making and introduced to their rights and responsibilities as citizens), as well as research on the development of a basic sense of competence. Reassuringly, the results of research on a sense of competence, political socialization, and our experience in Growing Up in Cities reinforce each other, and point to similar insights regarding how projects can empower young people to become politically engaged.

## ACHIEVING EFFECTIVE ACTION

### LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

When we revived the Growing Up in Cities program in eight countries in the 1990s, our fundamental operating maxim was, "Listen, listen, listen." We were committed to creating spaces where young people could voice their views about their urban environment and where adults would pay close attention. In doing this we sought to remain true to the spirit of Kevin Lynch when he launched the program in the 1970s.[6] It sounds like a simple enough step, but word came back from all eight countries that the 10 to 14 year olds involved were initially incredulous that adults would take their ideas seriously.

In the beginning of the program, we focused on hearing what young people said about their cities. How did they use them? How did they evaluate them? What made communities good or bad places in which to grow up? More recently, I have concluded that we need to listen equally carefully to how young participants define the outcomes that matter to them. If we seek to ensure that young people believe that they can achieve significant change by working with others, we need to understand "significant change" from their perspectives.

In my experience, adult facilitators' goals for a project often do not coincide with salient outcomes from the perspective of young members. As facilitators, we seek systemic change. We want urban policies related to children and youth revised to be more child and youth friendly. We want governments to operate by Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that "in all actions concerning children … the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration." We want politicians to put their money where their mouth is when they say that children are our future. This is as it should be, but when it doesn't happen this way—and it often doesn't—we worry that we have failed.

I think we need to remain committed to systemic change, but the reality we face is that the wheels of government grind slowly—if they grind in the right direction at all. An alternative is to acknowledge that systemic change is very difficult to achieve, to continue to work for it as strategically as we can, while at the same time seeking to understand what matters to young people in the immediate realm of their lives and to give their goals at least equal importance and attention.

When we evaluated our first two Growing Up in Cities sites in South Africa, group discussions with children and open-ended questionnaires with parents suggested that intangible gains were at least as important as physical changes to the environment.[7] Young people talked about greater knowledge and awareness of their environment and learning to communicate better, and parents independently echoed these assessments. As a young squatter camp resident said, "Kids here listen to each other, respect and share ideas,"[8] and as a parent observed, "They somehow feel proud of being heard."[9] These responses are similar to results from other evaluations of participatory projects, where outcomes that young people rate highly include greater confidence in their knowledge and insights, empathy for other perspectives, increased skills in public speaking and talking with others, new relationships with peers and adults, and opportunities to try out a variety of roles.[10]

When eight of us involved in Growing Up in Cities took stock of what we have learned about effective practice, David Driskell, based on his experience in India, and Jill Kruger, based on her work in South Africa, both concluded that intangible gains are even more important than physical interventions, although they are more difficult to measure.[11] Not only do young people learn how to speak up and entertain the views of others, but their ability to do so changes how others perceive them. David noted that when NGO staff who conducted the project in Bangalore witnessed the children's energy, hope and resilience, it transformed their understanding of slum dwellers from people they considered "dirty," "lazy," or passive victims, to resourceful partners who could and should lead development

processes. Jill reported similar changes in people's attitudes about squatter children and children affected by AIDS in South Africa. When Juan Torres made the project the focus of an undergraduate design studio, he recorded transformations in the design students' understanding of their professional roles as they came to know children in the low-income district that they studied, and see the children's potential to contribute to the city.[12]

These opportunities to speak and be heard may not fit conventional images of the political realm such as voting or attending planning commission hearings, but they form a foundation for citizenship. They contribute to what Jean Bethke Elshtain calls a "democratic disposition" that includes respect for the views of others and interest in the public good.[13] Therefore providing time and space for children to express themselves, in media of their choosing, with recognition that they are heard, is part of facilitators' ethical obligation, and according to young people's evaluations, an important outcome in itself.

## NETWORK, NETWORK, NETWORK

Early in Growing Up in Cities' revival, I realized that another operating maxim is, "Network, network, network." If we want anything to come of young people's ideas, then work with participants must be undergirded by countless hours spent finding allies who want to hear what they have to say and take their ideas forward—people who will "walk the talk." Just as my understanding of the function of listening has broadened with time, my understanding of networking has acquired new dimensions too.

Just as listening is about more than just gathering information about how young people use the city and their ideas for improving it, networking is about more than assembling an alliance for action. Young people are networking as much as facilitators. The social connections that they form with peers and adults during participation have a critical value. Research on political socialization shows that supportive social networks both integrate people into civic action and sustain their commitment.[14] Adult facilitators and allies—and even

more persuasively, peers in participatory projects—serve as role models for political action. They show how democratic decision-making and collective action are done, and when they are similar in age, they demonstrate that if they can do it, then others like themselves can do it too. From basic research on the development of a sense of competence, we know that nurturing adults and others similar to ourselves form role models of the most influential kind.[15]

For children who are restricted to their homes in dangerous urban districts or who do long hours of work to help their families, the project space may be one of the few places where they can meet and make friends, talk freely, and engage in activities that are fun. In sites as distant as the Children's Clubs of Nepal[16] and the Growing Up in Cities network in New York,[17] young people identified making new friends as one of the aspects of participation that they valued most. In addition to being a personal benefit, these new friendships can contribute to political development if they introduce participants to people from diverse backgrounds and broaden their understanding of different groups in society. For example, one of the Growing Up in New York City sites combined children from a school that served economically stable middle and working-class families with children from a community-based organization that served low-income immigrants. As the two groups became friends, the school children gained a new understanding of immigrant issues.

The new social networks that young people form with adults and peers can contribute to what Arjun Appadurai[18] calls "the capacity to aspire." One of the most essential ways in which the poor are disadvantaged, Appadurai argues, is in the capacity to envision possibilities to better their lives, understand how to get there, and muster the necessary resources and social connections to navigate these pathways. In the Montreal and Guadalajara sites of Growing Up in Cities, children from working-class and immigrant families paired up with college students, enabling them to understand what college attendance involves.[19] The Growing Up in New York City network went a step further by bringing participants to Cornell University to present their achievements to the Department of City and Regional Planning and

then meet admission counselors. Increasing opportunities for social mobility for disadvantaged youth is a political action.

Finally, the peer networks that young people form in participatory projects can contribute to generational changes in politics. As Constance Flanagan noted in her review of research on young people's volunteerism and civic engagement, early research on political socialization assumed a process of replication: adults passed political knowledge and values down to the young with the goal that they would assimilate existing norms and maintain political stability.[20] In contrast, new political theories see the engagement of younger generations as a source of political change. The peer networks that young people form in participatory projects, under conditions which encourage participants to show initiative in defining issues and proposing solutions, serve as incubators for change.

## DON'T JUST LISTEN—DO SOMETHING!

From the beginning when we revived Growing Up in Cities, we were committed to taking the project a step further than Lynch and his colleagues managed to do in the 1970s. We didn't just want to understand young people's ideas and pass them on to planners and city officials: we wanted to see at least some of these ideas get translated into action and to involve young people in implementation whenever possible. Therefore another working maxim that we are committed to is, "Don't just listen—Do something!"

In the beginning and still to a considerable degree, we have envisioned this "something" as physical changes to improve children's environments, or even better, changes in urban policies that will improve environments for children across the city. Different maxims overlap, however, and if we listen carefully to what young people say matters to them, then we have to broaden the meaning of "doing something" to include intangible as well as tangible outcomes. Feeling heard and respected, treating others with respect, making new friends, perceiving new pathways for one's life . . . these experiences are worth doing too. But whether goals are tangible or intangible, it is critical for young people to see their efforts yield results. Research

on the development of a sense of competence or self-efficacy (people's belief that they can achieve the goals that they set themselves) shows that nothing builds confidence as effectively as mastery experiences, when people find themselves achieving success in areas that they consider significant.[21] If one of our main goals as project facilitators is to foster active citizenship, then we need to provide experiences that leave young people feeling, "I just did something important!"

Ideally, we hope that young people will experience success in formal channels for political action. They will present their ideas to the city council or a city agency and the response will be, "Great ideas! We have money for that in the budget, and we'll set up a meeting right away to discuss implementation."

Since we can't guarantee this result, one of our strategies in Growing Up in Cities has been to divide young people's priorities for action into three groups: actions that they can do for themselves; actions that they could do with additional resources or assistance; and actions that they need adults to take for them.[22] Areas for adult help are analyzed according to which are government responsibilities, which could be addressed with external means of support (such as a grant from a nonprofit donor), and which require partnerships with local adults. The resulting action plan can combine activities to bring about physical or policy changes with intangible outcomes, such as gaining confidence to speak in front of a group or having fun with friends. Then while we, as adult facilitators, may be berating ourselves because the government is not responding, young people may still be experiencing success in arenas where they have control, through activities that they find intrinsically fulfilling. For example, although young people in a Lower Eastside site of Growing Up in New York City wanted to reduce drugs and crime in their neighborhood, they wisely decided to begin with the more manageable goal of beautifying community parks.[23]

## DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING—TALK ABOUT IT!

For me, "Don't just do something—talk about it?!" is a relatively new operating maxim which I have learned from the research on political socialization. One of the recurring results from more than 50 years of research in this field is the importance of talk, whether we look at the results of large surveys, interviews, or case studies, and whether it is talk about current events, abstract ideas like justice, personal experiences in the public realm, the analysis of information, or reflections about actions.[24] What is important is that it needs to be talk that respects a variety of views, that reflects an interest in the public good, that explores options, and that makes room for negotiation and compromise. Being able to talk in this way is one of the core elements of a "democratic disposition,"[25] and just having opportunities for talk of this kind is associated with young people's civic knowledge, civic interest and commitment to civic goals.[26] Talk of this kind is also the way to analyze the dynamics of success or failure and emerge better prepared for the next round of action. During the colloquium on "Understanding and Shaping the City with Children and Youth," Roger Hart (2008) shared the story of primary school students' who lobbied to save a popular public bath in their British town from demolition by the government.[27] They mounted an intense, intelligent campaign … and in the end they lost. Nevertheless, their efforts were taken seriously, they experienced failure in solidarity with others, they learned how local government worked, and they talked about the reasons why their side failed. As a result, they came out of the experience politically seasoned rather than alienated.

## INTERGENERATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

John Dewey[28] observed that reflection involves discerning the relation between what we try to do and what happens in consequence, so that we understand the conditions that led to our experience and we can work for desired ends more effectively in the future. The essence of democratic participation, he argued, is that people who bring diverse capacities to common aims coordinate their efforts and

reflect on their experiences together in order to make the adjustments that changing situations require.[29]

A combination of action and reflection is vital. All of the rules of good practice discussed in this paper—listening, networking, taking action, and talking about it—represent different moments of this practice.

Like Dewey's philosophy of democracy, child and youth participation assumes that political socialization is not a simple model of reproduction, where the older generation passes a stable political system down to the young, but rather assumes processes of generational change which give young people a role in defining what the public good means and how it could be achieved.

This is a hopeful openness, because there is growing contemporary awareness that the future needs to diverge radically from the past. As the series of international conferences under Kofi Annan's tenure as Secretary General of the United Nations demonstrated, humanity faces great challenges on many fronts, including population and health, the environment, urban development, social development, human rights, and the realization of children's rights. In the face of these challenges, existing political systems are not stable and old practices need to give way to new solutions.

As facilitators of participatory planning and design, adults have an ethical obligation to give younger generations a sense of hope, purpose and confidence that they can envision better possibilities and contribute to their attainment. The challenges that humanity faces require the cooperative problem solving of all ages. Partnerships between the generations can create opportunities for capacity building for adults as well as young people if adults hold themselves open to young people's insights, energy and creativity.

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